

# **The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r**

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African Americans and the African world.

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## **U.S. Chamber: Caught with its Rolls Down**

**Solidarity America**

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The nation's premier anti-worker and anti-union institution, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, was caught recently with its rolls down. Or up - however you want to look at it.

Does the behemoth representative of Corporate America represent 3 million businesses, or does it represent 300,000? Or, does it represent 200,000?

The question came up recently, when the pranksters, "The Yes Men," held a faux press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., purporting to represent the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, to announce that the Chamber had reversed its stand on climate change legislation and that it now endorsed the proposed rules and regulations to reduce greenhouse gases by some of the nation's biggest polluters (many of them supposedly among its members).

A representative of the Chamber entered the press conference before it concluded and declared that the imposters had misrepresented the group's position and that any questions should be directed to him. He declined to answer the question: Then, does the Chamber still oppose the proposed law and does it favor the continued pollution of the air as had been previously stated by the group?

The little prank turned out to be a big blow to the credibility of the U.S. Chamber, in that its claimed membership of three million was called into question. As it turned out, the membership rolls depend on who is counting and how the counting is done.

Many local and regional Chambers of Commerce were quick to point out that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce does not speak for them and that the national body does not consult all of the subordinate bodies before they take a position on such an important issue as that of the climate change bill that is before Congress.

It could be that the dues money of the "little chambers" doesn't cover even a small percentage of the U.S. Chamber's lobbying and advertising, both in favor of policies and legislation that it supports and in opposition to those things that it wants to eliminate or prevent. The national body's budget is reported to be at least \$150 million and the dues of small city, county, and regional chamber members - in the hundreds of dollars each - would not total the kind of money that makes up the national budget.

It's not the small change that the U.S. Chamber is after, because, according to the Green Chamber of Commerce (which supports legislation that reduces greenhouse gases), the U.S. Chamber is "dominated by oil companies, pharmaceutical giants, automakers, and other polluting industries..." Therefore, it makes sense that they would be against any legislation that would curb the pollution-generating giants of the American economy.

The U.S. Chamber plays with the big boys and girls. They belong to the same clubs, take their vacations in the same places, and live in the same gated communities. That's why they walk hand-in-hand with the big banks and big bankers and the financial gurus.

And that's why they are one of the most powerful opponents of any law that gives American workers any power in their workplaces. They mask their virulent opposition to workers by using the code word "unions," when they speak of proposed laws that might empower workers.

Recently, they came to the defense of the banking industry - the bailout of big banking, and the bailout of the other players in the financial meltdown of America and much of the rest of the world.

Whatever the original intent of the founders of the U.S. Chamber - and it was said to have been formed to represent small businesses, as opposed to what we used to call "big business," now known as Corporate America - they have left that intent far behind and, with it, they have left small businesses, the mom-and-pops. This apparently is one of the reasons that there is such a thing as the Green Chamber of Commerce in America, which describes itself as the "new" chamber, dedicated to "sustainable" businesses.

It seems clear that U.S. Chamber policies on the issues of the day, on their legislative program, lobbying, and advertising are geared to maintaining the power of Corporate America, not to empowering small businesses and certainly not about giving an inch to American workers. Although they would protest that they are in full support of American workers, through their purported efforts to "create jobs," they never say

what the quality of those jobs might be in their own corporate mind.

In fact, the jobs they envision are low-wage and they bring no benefits or pensions with them. American workers, of course, are competing with people around the world in manufacturing jobs - even in the vaunted information technology - who are paid a small fraction of what an American worker would expect from an American company.

The good-jobs-for-life days are gone forever. Great powers are arrayed against the creation of the kind of jobs that Americans expected to continue to be created after World War II. Now, there is a different kind of war. It's a war to keep the wealth and money flowing to the top of the economic scale in America, and powerful organizations aim to see that it keeps flowing in that direction. So far, they've been pretty successful.

After the fake press conference, the Chamber tried to dance around the issue of its membership numbers and tried to rationalize how they came up with the three million membership figure. Fact is, the larger number is cover for them.

The group tries to represent itself as home-grown, but they may be one of the biggest "Astroturf" (fake grass-roots) organizations in the country. Even the 300,000 membership might be much overblown, because the money they spend each year to keep the government from spending on low-cost housing, revitalization of cities, on education, on health care, on the environment can't be coming just from their rank-and-file members in the small cities, villages, and counties of this country.

Rather, that money comes from its biggest members, which might be more appropriately called clients, because the Chamber is willing to do the dirty work for them, in the state legislatures and in the Congress. All of the issues that are vital to the poor in this country, to wage-earning workers, and to the marginalized are the meat of the fight for the Chamber. They are against most programs and legislation designed to raise them up along with the rest of the country.

Just this month, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce opened an advertising campaign said to be multi-million-dollar, to promote "free enterprise" in America. But, considering its position on the bailout of so many giant institutions that were "too big to fail," the free enterprise proclamation rings hollow.

Judging from its position on such things as the puny minimum wage and any programs for the people, the U.S. Chamber would like us to believe that it's good to have free enterprise for working people - "sink-or-swim" free enterprise - and bailouts using the people's tax money for the giant enterprises that failed through incompetence and greed. Free enterprise for the workers, socialism for Corporate America and the rich.

Thanks to "The Yes Men" for creating an opening for a full discussion about groups like the U.S. Chamber - who controls them, who funds them, and who benefits from their overwhelming power in our political system and our national life.

**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and

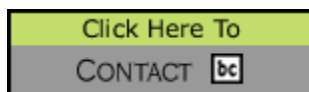
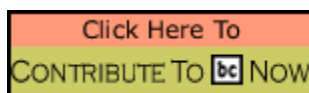
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