

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

An independent weekly internet magazine  
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,  
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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**September 24 , 2009 - Issue 343**

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## **Whither ACORN?**

### **The African World**

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Sometimes an organization is faced with a crisis of such proportions that it calls into question its integrity and relationship with the public. In the corporate world, one can think of the airline ValuJet which, after the disastrous crash into the Everglades of one of its planes, so lost the confidence of the public that it had to shut down; remake itself; and brand itself with a new name: *AirTran*.

It is important to separate the attacks on ACORN which it is receiving from the political Right from the actual content of the organization's problems. Let's face it: any progressive organization, particularly one as significant as ACORN, must assume that it will be attacked by the political Right. In fact, the Right is very clear about that. So, the fact of an attack from the Right should come as no surprise.

Something is very wrong in ACORN and, unfortunately, the leadership of the organization does not seem to recognize the depth of the problem. The alleged embezzlement of nearly one million dollars by Dale Rathke, the brother of ACORN founder and long-time chief organizer, Wade Rathke, sent shockwaves throughout the progressive movement and foundation community. It was not simply the fact of the alleged theft, but the reported manner in which this had been covered up such that much of the leadership, not to mention the membership, apparently had no knowledge

of the circumstances. The matter was handled much like a family embarrassment rather than as a legal and ethical challenge.

Now we are made witness to one of the most bizarre circumstances I can remember. Right-wingers, with a clear objective of discrediting ACORN largely due to its voter registration work among people of color, undertook a mission to display ACORN's alleged corruption to the world. It does not matter, to a great degree, that in many places that these right-wingers showed up that they were thrown out. What matters is that they captured on camera ACORN employees allegedly offering to assist undercover personnel in the establishment of a BROTHEL!!!

Unless those ACORN employees were plants within ACORN, there is an obvious question: what could those employees possibly have been thinking about? What level of training and supervision, not to mention ethics, were they guided by such that they would think that this was permissible? On top of all of this, what sort of basic common sense did they lack that they would not GUESS that this might have been a set up?

The response from the ACORN leadership to this latest incident has been to terminate the employees and insist that this is unrepresentative of the work of ACORN. While I know that this is not representative of the work of ACORN, such an answer is insufficient at best. Leaving aside other allegations targeted at ACORN, the question is what is going on in the leadership such that such actions can unfold?

From the outside it appears that at least two things are operating within ACORN. The first is arrogance within a part of the leadership. That fact that a clique within the leadership would attempt to shroud an alleged theft and treat it as if it were a personal matter displays a significant level of lack of accountability. The extent of the alleged embezzlement was such that criminal prosecution should have been entertained immediately. Yet this clique kept this silent and did not discuss the ramifications for the entire organization.

The second thing that appears to be operating is that the organization is not operating, at least in a functional manner. In other words, there is a systemic lack of accountability and training. On the one hand, in the face of the right-wing provocation, some cities immediately recognized that something was up, but, for reasons unknown, this was not communicated to the entire organization. Worse, that some employees when actually confronted with an illegal business proposition did not have the proper awareness of the consequences of giving advice on an illegal matter shows, at a minimum, poor judgment.

The subsequent attacks on ACORN by the Right, therefore, have been entirely predictable. ACORN has opened itself up and invited the enemy in. Yet they now wish for all liberals and progressives to rally around them in their defense yet their leadership only offers an anemic explanation of the depths of this crisis.

Should ACORN dissolve? Absolutely not. ACORN has been an essential part of the progressive movement for nearly forty years. That said, neither should progressives act as if the extent of the crisis in ACORN can be ignored. Certainly the attacks on ACORN by the Right are both politically and racially motivated. But that does not mean that ACORN can afford to act as if nothing is new under the Sun. In many other countries, in

the face of such scandals the entire leadership would resign without a moment's second thought. Yet here, in the face of repeated, humiliating mistakes, the leadership seems to think that relatively minor changes can remedy the extent of the problem.

What can ACORN do?

1. **Bring in a crisis management team to take over the day-to-day operations of ACORN:** The current managing leadership should be either suspended or given other duties while a new management team is brought into ACORN to assess the extent of the organization's problems and INTRODUCE changes in the day-to-day operations of the organization. This should include an evaluation of current staff and supervisors, financial accountability, ethics and other aspects of organization. A new organization operating system needs to be put into place to ensure staff accountability, including in the hiring process. Such a team would be on temporary assignment to ACORN to assist in the rebuilding of the organization.
2. **Leadership retreat:** One part of the work of the crisis management team should be the organizing of a leadership retreat of the current national leadership plus any additional key leaders from chapters around the country. Such a retreat should aim at evaluating the nature of the current crisis in the organization; what has worked; what has failed; and new strategic directions. New leadership elections should be organized.
3. **An apology to the friends, supporters and members of ACORN:** To be honest, I do not want to hear anything more about how the Right is attacking ACORN. What I do want to hear is how sorry and self-critical the ACORN leadership is about the current state of affairs and how they, in fact, let down the members, supporters and friends of the organization.

I know what the objectives of the Right are: they want to eliminate any and all evidence of a progressive movement in the USA. What we do not have to do is make their job any easier.

**BlackCommentator.com** Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and co-author of, [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.



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