



Activists Gather in Washington To Debate the Future of the Corporation

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Organized by Ralph Nader and the Center for Study of Responsive Law, more than 200 activists and scholars convened in Washington, DC on April 2nd for an all-day conference on "Controlling the Corporation." Ralph Nader opened the conference, outlining the growing corporate role in everyday life. "Mega-corporations use the public's own resources against it, planning intimately and relentlessly our future," exercised in many spheres, including "mass media, health care, transportation, tax code, housing, trade agreements," even "patenting our genes."

Nader explained that the conference would address these issues in two directions. One is to highlight ways to constrain corporate power, through such means as campaign finance reform, prosecuting corporate crimes and protecting the commons from privatization. The second involves "displacing" mega-corporations through "cooperatives, small entrepreneurs, new economies, local and renewable energies, and democratic credit unions."

Speakers on the first topic included former Congressman Bob Edgar (D-PA), who proposed to amend the Constitution to declare that "corporations are not people, money is not speech, and legislative bodies have the power to regulate financing." Activist and author Harvey Wasserman proposed further reforms, including abolition of the electoral college, automatic voter registration for all 18 year-olds, elimination of electronic ballots, weekend voting and authorizing national referenda. The discussion, moderated by Theresa Amato of Citizen Works, also aired ideas such as providing free airtime to political candidates.

A second panel examined ways to curtail corporate crime. Russell Mokhiber of the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, for example, called for criminal prosecution of corporate malfeasance, arguing that criminal conviction sends a message that "a civil fine or a deferred and non prosecution does not." Bill Black, professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and renowned former bank regulator, contrasted the regulatory response to the Savings & Loans crisis of the late-1980s with the generalized impunity of the present. Kent Greenfield, professor at the Boston College Law School championed ending limited liability for corporations. Others speaking in favor of reducing corporations' legal privileges included Marco Simons of EarthRights and Robert Weissman of Public Citizen.

A third panel, titled "Protecting the 'Commons' from Insatiable Advocates of Privatization," began with an account by David Morris of the Institute for Local Self-

Reliance on a decision by Fort Worth, Texas to remove the word "public" from its public library to "keep up with the times" and because of its "potentially negative connotation." He noted that he was pleased, however, by the Occupy movement's effect of shifting the narrative. Wenonah Hauter of the Food & Water Watch cited that Willem Buiter, chief economist of Citibank, has said that he expects "to see a globally integrated market for fresh water... futures markets and other derivative water-based financial instruments ... will follow" and argued for the need to maintain public control over water. Dr. Margaret Flowers, a pediatrician and a lead organizer of the conference, discussed her advocacy for universal health care.

A panel on the Occupy movement included Christopher Hedges, Kevin Zeese, Dean Baker and Mary Bottari. Hedges advocated for the development of the Occupy movement into a militantly nonviolent movement that imposed a zero-tolerance policy for other forms of action. "The resources of the state are tremendous and have been employed against the Occupy movement," he said, which included the "physical eradication of the encampments." Hedges argued that those that engaged in acts of vandalism or covered their faces unwittingly abetted the ability for authorities to justify force when reacting. Kevin Zeese, a conference organizer, called for more development of "democratized economic institutions so people get control over their own lives." Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, thought Occupy Wall Street had wisely chosen a very appropriate target for anger. Baker noted that, "Hedge fund managers make \$3-4 billion a year." Baker estimated that the median net wealth for a couple over 65 was \$170,000, which meant that hedge fund managers "make in 10 minutes what a typical family would have accumulated over a lifetime."

While many conference panels focus on ways to constrain corporate power, conference speakers also directly addressed the questions that Nader raised in his opening remarks regarding the need to develop positive economic alternatives and build community wealth. Democracy Collaborative Co-Founder Gar Alperovitz emphasized that, "Ralph used the term 'displace,' not simply 'control.'" Alperovitz noted that the word 'systemic' had not been mentioned. The goal, Alperovitz said, must be "changing the system, not just changing or controlling the corporation."

"In the coming three decades," Alperovitz declared, "we should lay the foundations for a fundamental base for a truly democratic economy." State initiatives and battles for single-payer health care, Alperovitz said, are one means to "displace corporate power," as are the efforts to create public banks modeled after the Bank of North Dakota. Already, Alperovitz pointed out, there are "130 million Americans involved in co-ops," and more workers with ownership stake in their firms than there are union members in the private sector. These institutions, Alperovitz suggested, are ripe with political potential, "waiting to be activated."

Greg LeRoy of Good Jobs First emphasized the role public money plays in subsidizing corporate behemoths. "Three-quarters of the for-profit private prisons in this country get economic development subsidies," LeRoy said. LeRoy noted, however, that broad coalitions of labor, housing, civil rights and environmental activists and progressive

developers can successfully organize to use public economic development funds instead to promote local hiring, affordable housing, living wages, local businesses, and community facilities.

Gayle McLaughlin, mayor of Richmond, California highlighted the success her city had in restraining the expansion of Chevron, which has a large oil refinery based in Richmond, to protect the local environment. McLaughlin also discussed the importance of building economic alternatives. Last year, McLaughlin visited Mondragón worker-owned cooperatives in Spain, a model that she hopes to see implemented in coming years in Richmond.

The conference closed with a panel titled “Mobilizing for Sustained Action,” with representatives from SumOfUs, the United Steelworkers, and the Industrial Areas Foundations all making supportive remarks. Ralph Nader closed the conference on a hopeful note. "Conferences have left and created new groups," he said. "Young people have reoriented the trajectory of their lives" as a result.

For more information on the Center for the Study of Responsive Law, see: <http://csrl.org/>