

Editors' choice: Top ten crusaders for social justice

Contributed by Laura Nathan, Ben Helphand, and Nicole Leistikow, with the help of several anonymous judges
Tuesday, November 11, 2003

We pick the top ten U.S. organizations working on social justice issues and now, your turn to vote! Which ten organizations working on social justice issues in the United States have had the most influence over the past three decades? In the course of researching social movements for this Special Issue of InTheFray Magazine, we talked to a number of activists and scholars and gathered their opinions on this question. Below are the organizations that came up on the most judges' top ten lists. They are in alphabetical order.

Of course, these groups will probably be different from the ones you'd pick. So here's where you come in, loyal reader:

1. Please post a message to our Forum and tell us what you like, and don't like, about our experts' choices. Tell us what groups you'd add to the Top Ten, and which groups you'd take off. Defend your choices.

2. Email us at survey@inthefray.com with your picks for (1) the Top Ten U.S. organizations and (2) the Top Ten U.S. activists. (The question is: "Which ten organizations and which ten activists working on social justice issues in the United States have had the most influence during the past thirty years (1973-2003)?" We'll publish the results of this reader poll in the next issue of InTheFray Magazine. You have until the end of this month (November 30) to vote.

NOTE: Though we're limiting this vote to U.S. activists and organizations, we encourage you to email us at survey@inthefray.com with the names of any activists or organizations that are doing important work abroad. Include a brief description of that work, and why it's important. We'll include your comments in next month's issue (with or without your name, depending on your preference). You can also post your thoughts in the Forum.

Thanks for your input!

Laura Nathan
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InTheFray TOP TEN:

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS IN AMERICA (1973-2003)

#1: ACORN

In 1970, a band of welfare mothers from Arkansas formed ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, to seek social change benefiting low- and moderate-income families. Today, the organization has 150,000 family members in 700 neighborhoods and fifty-one cities across the country, including Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington. Whether they are campaigning to increase the minimum wage, negotiating the rates of utility services, or cracking down on predatory lenders, ACORN activists show a passion for "organizing the unorganized" and protecting the rights of impoverished families.

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#2: ACT UP

Soon after the HIV/AIDS epidemic began devastating lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) communities, activists in New York formed the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP. Its mission was to raise awareness about

HIV/AIDS, the inadequate response of local and federal officials, and the effects of the crisis on LGBT communities.

From its beginnings, this nonpartisan, grassroots organization has made headlines and sparked controversy for its unconventional and confrontational methods. ACT UP first grabbed the public's attention in 1987 when activists marched on Wall Street demanding, among other things, that the Food and Drug Administration approve experimental drugs that might save the lives of people with AIDS. Two years later, ACT UP became notorious for disrupting a mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York; the activists were protesting Cardinal John O'Connor's opposition to condom distribution. Other high-profile ACT UP "direct actions" have included storming magazine offices, interrupting news broadcasts, and surrounding hospitals and government buildings. To this day, ACT UP continues to insist that direct action and public visibility are essential in bringing about social change.

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#3: The American Lung Association

If you are twenty-five or older you probably remember sitting in airplane cabins filled with cigarette smoke. If you don't, either you don't fly or you owe a big thank you to the American Lung Association (ALA). In 1987, ALA activists led a successful campaign to ban smoking on all U.S. domestic airline flights lasting two hours or less (expanded to 6 hours in 1989 and to international flights in 1992)

Founded in 1904 to fight tuberculosis, the ALA is the oldest voluntary health organization in the country. It is perhaps best known for its tireless fight against the tobacco industry. In 1960, when much of the American public was still unaware of the health risks associated with smoking, the ALA issued a policy statement that became one of the first salvoes in the anti-tobacco war: "Cigarette smoking is a major cause of lung cancer." Over the next forty years, ALA's education and lobbying efforts were the backbone of the anti-smoking movement.

In more recent years, the ALA has also proven itself to be a champion of the environment. It played a major role in the passage of the landmark 1990 federal Clean Air Act. As a result of an ALA lawsuit, the Environmental Protection Agency established stricter air-quality standards for smog and soot in 1997. Today, the ALA continues its work "to prevent lung disease and promote lung health," remaining vigilant against Big Tobacco and leading the fight against the asthma epidemic.

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President and chief executive officer: John L. Kirkwood

#4: Center for Community Change

Founded in 1968, the Center for Community Change is devoted to "helping low-income people, especially people of color, develop the power and capacity to change their communities and public policies for the better." To that end, the Center works with thousands of grassroots organizations across the country, giving ordinary citizens the skills they need to change their lives and rebuild their communities from the bottom up. Over the decades, its work has contributed to the building of low-income housing and community centers, the development of businesses and jobs, and reductions in crime and drug use.

In recent years, the Center has worked to raise public awareness of the plight of the poor in today's troubled American economy. As one of its recent press releases points out: "The number of people in poverty increased by 1.7 million to nearly 35 million in 2002, raising the official poverty rate from 11.7 percent in 2001 to 12.1 percent in 2002." Nowadays the Center's energies are focused on two areas: providing on-site assistance to grassroots groups, and connecting

people in low-income communities to necessary resources. By including community-based groups, local leaders, and advocates throughout the process, the Center makes sure that low-income people are informed about the policies that impact their lives.

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#5: Center for Third World Organizing

Founded in 1984, the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO, pronounced C-2) is a national, multiracial "movement center" that works with community organizations and grassroots leaders. It seeks to develop an analysis "showing how structures of racial privilege shape our lives and communities," a vision "motivating movements based on race, gender, sexuality, and economic justice," and a strategy of "building organizing capacity necessary to achieve meaningful social change." With these goals in mind, CTWO works in communities of color throughout the United States, training organizers, offering advice, and providing other resources to aid activists in their "direct action" organizing.

CTWO has been a pioneer in building broad coalitions for racial justice. Its Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program has established an active network of organizations and activists of color working on behalf of racial equality. In its Community Action Training workshops, experienced community organizers teach participants how to build political coalitions at the grassroots level. CTWO also has a program called GIFT (Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training), which teaches interns from communities of color how to do grassroots fundraising.

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#6: Environmental Justice Fund

The environmental justice movement first began mobilizing in the late seventies, at a time when state and federal governments were beginning to implement a wave of legislation dealing with the environment and civil rights. Since then, the movement has persistently highlighted the failure of reforms in both areas to account for environmental damage that disparately affects communities of color. The movement's motto, "We speak for ourselves," hints at its focus on local organizations and local solutions, and its resistance to the kinds of corporate-controlled globalization that have sparked protests around the world. Its activists favor a much broader view of the "environment" than many mainstream environmentalists, defining it as "where we live, work, play, go to school, and pray." They call into question market-based "solutions" that help certain privileged sectors while shortchanging or even harming communities that lack political and economic clout.

The Environmental Justice Fund (EJ Fund) is a national membership organization "dedicated to strengthening the environmental justice movement." It was founded by six environmental justice networks in 1995, and continues to operate under an inclusive, loosely organized structure. The EJ Fund helps coordinate a vast network of local and regional coalitions that operate under the "Principles of Environmental Justice," first ratified in 1991 at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington.

Environmental justice activists can point to several recent victories, including Executive Order 12898, issued in 1994, which directed all federal agencies dealing with public health or the environment to make environmental justice an integral part of their policies. President Bill Clinton said the order was intended to "provide minority communities and low-income communities access to public information on, and an opportunity for public participation in, matters relating to

public health or the environment.â€• Clintonâ€™s executive order also resulted in the creation of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, which seeks to improve governmental accountability within the Environmental Protection Agency.

At the local level, environmental justice groups have won a number of highly publicized battles against polluters. In St. James Parish in Louisiana (a highly polluted region known as â€œcancer alleyâ€•), activists prevented the Shintech corporation from building a polyvinyl chloride plastics plant. In Californiaâ€™s Ward Valley, environmentalists waged a successful campaign to protect the regionâ€™s water supply and threatened desert ecosystem. In New York, the â€œClean Fuel, Clean Air Good Healthâ€• campaign replaced polluting diesel buses with vehicles powered by cleaner fuel options. And in Tucson, Arizona, activists upset about tainted wells recently won an \$84.5 million settlement from polluters, the largest settlement for groundwater contamination in U.S. history.

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#7: Human Rights Campaign

The Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF) was founded in 1980 to raise money for congressional candidates who supported gay rights. It represented an organized response to right-wing groups such as the Moral Majority and the Conservative Political Action Committee, which had established a track record of getting conservative candidates elected. The HRCFâ€™s growing political clout became apparent in the congressional elections two years later, when 81 percent of 118 HRCF-backed candidates won. In 1985, the HRCF and the Gay Rights National Lobby merged to form the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, which quickly became the most prominent champion of the rights of sexual minorities in America. The new organization arrived on the scene just as lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) communities began grappling with the disastrous consequences of the AIDS epidemic and the Supreme Courtâ€™s landmark 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, which outlawed sodomy.

In the past two decades, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation has lobbied on behalf of same-sex adoption, hate crime legislation to protect LGBT individuals, extending the right of civil marriage, domestic partner benefits, gay service in the military, and expanding the Employment Non-Discrimination Act to protect sexual minorities. It has established education programs in local schools, raised public awareness about the role that sexual orientation plays in immigration law, and upheld the importance of diversity in all forms. By drawing attention to such a broad range of issues, the HRCF has exposed the American governmentâ€™s consistent failure to follow through on its promises of political equality, and challenged the very family and relationship units that structure sexual and gender norms in the United States.

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Executive director: Elizabeth Birch

#8: Jobs with Justice

Jobs for Justice (JwJ) was founded in 1987 with a belief that people must unite and organize in order to provide a better way of life for themselves and their families. With a presence in forty cities and twenty-nine states across the country, JwJ has created a national network of labor, faith-based, community, and student organizations working together on behalf of â€œworkplace and community social justice campaigns.â€• It helps individuals become advocates for the workplace rights to which they are entitled, all the while trying to connect them to larger national and international struggles for economic and social justice.

When new recruits join JwJ, they take a pledge, promising, â€œDuring the next year, I will be there at least five times for

someone else's fight, as well as my own. If enough of us are there, we'll all start winning. The organization's passion for building bridges and returning power to the people can be seen in an initiative it helped organize this fall, the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. Borrowing from the tactics pioneered by the Freedom Riders during the civil rights era, nearly 1,000 immigrants and activists piled into buses and toured the country for twelve days, finally converging on Washington and New York for a series of meetings and rallies that focused public attention on antiquated immigration laws and the plight of low-wage immigrant workers.

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#9: The National Organization for Women

With 500,000 members and 550 chapters in all fifty states, the National Organization for Women is the largest U.S. organization dedicated to guaranteeing equality for all women. Since its founding in 1966, NOW has been committed to taking positions and actions that are uncompromising, unorthodox, and ahead of their time. NOW's long list of priorities includes amending the U.S. constitution to guarantee equal rights for women, protecting abortion rights and reproductive freedom, opposing racism, class-based discrimination, and bigotry against sexual minorities, and ending violence against women.

NOW has used a wide range of tactics—both conventional and unconventional—to push for its political agenda. Its activists have brought forth lawsuits over gender-based discrimination, lobbied and campaigned for politicians, organized mass marches, rallies, and pickets, and engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience. This multi-pronged approach toward activism is one way that NOW recognizes the diverse voices and interests of the millions of women in America.

Over the years, NOW has been successful on numerous occasions in capturing national media attention and the American public's imagination. It has organized some of the largest rallies on behalf of women's rights in the history of the United States, such as the massive 1978 march on Washington in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, the March for Women's Lives in 1992 (the largest abortion-rights demonstration in U.S. history), the first mass demonstration to focus on violence against women in 1995, and the 1996 March for the Right to Fight that defended affirmative action and drew attention to the unique plight of women of color. These unprecedented national campaigns to raise public awareness of gender issues have drawn countless women into public office, expanded employment and educational opportunities for women, and helped bring about tougher laws protecting women from harassment, violence, and discrimination. Most recently, NOW has embarked upon a campaign to beat back recent legislation that curtails women's reproductive rights.

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#10: Rainbow/PUSH Coalition

The Rainbow/PUSH Coalition (RPS) is a multiracial, multi-issue, and international membership organization that works on behalf of social, racial, and economic justice. RPS is the result of the 1997 merger of two organizations: Operation PUSH (founded in 1971) and the National Rainbow Coalition (founded in 1985). In fighting for affirmative action, equal rights, employment rights, and civic empowerment, RPS has explicitly linked its struggle for justice to the principles of the American Dream. As RPS's founder, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, explains: "The American Dream is one big tent of cultures, races, and religions. Under that tent, everybody is assured equal protection under the law, equal opportunity, equal access, and a fair share. Our struggle demands that we open closed doors, extend the tent, and even the playing

field.â€•

In its six years of existence, RPC has registered hundreds of thousands of voters, mediated labor disputes, and lobbied for the inclusion of more racial and ethnic minorities in all areas of the entertainment industry. It has also negotiated economic covenants with major corporations, helping cultivate hundreds of minority-owned franchises and creating other business opportunities for people of color.

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