Feisty, creative coalitions are standing up to the corporate order

Do the elites really think they can knock us down without provoking us to stand up and push back?

WHILE TAKING IN the splendor of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, a tourist came across a monk and asked if he could snap a photo of him. The monk nodded, posed proudly, and the picture was taken. A young boy was selling water nearby, so the tourist bought a bottle, gave it to the monk, then paid the boy and waited for his change. But none was forthcoming. Assuming there was a language barrier, the tourist pointed to his palm and asked in an exaggerated manner, “Don’t I get change?” The boy glanced over at the monk, then looked directly up into the eyes of the tourist and said in perfect English, “Change comes from within.”

Indeed it does, and I’m happy to report that as I travel around the country, I see a promising populist change coming from within the workaday people of grassroots America. As polls confirm, and as you can discover in conversations at practically any Chat & Chew Café these days, a rebellion is steadily spreading against the unrestrained avarice and arrogance of today’s domineering corporate elite—from Big Oil frackers to Walmart wage whackers—who’ve effectively taken control of the country’s workplace, politics, Congress, courts, and mass media.

Of course, neither of the two money-addicted, corporate-coddling major parties wants to touch serious Populism, so this simmering nationwide insurrection is politically homeless at the moment. In fact, except for such important voices as Sens. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, it’s not even discussed on the national stage, as though the Powers That Be think they might make it go away by pretending it’s not there.

But this Populist stirring is neither imaginary nor ephemeral. Far from going away, it’s going to grow hotter, because its causes are all too real. Every day, in a myriad of ways, a growing majority of people are experiencing raw economic abuses and gross political affronts by America’s ascendant oligarchs. Do the moneyed elites and their governmental enablers really think they can knock down and kick out so many without any pushback? If so, they badly misjudge the determinedly democratic nature of our people.

From the rebellious start of our nation on through successive decades of scrappy democracy movements, Populist uprisings have been the throbbing heart of America’s body politic, and one is coming again.

This amounts to more than a series of disjointed local fights against individual polluters, union busters, banksters, privatizers, or other greedheads. Mad-as-hellers have always tried to battle the outrages that pop up in their own community, and people are certainly doing so today. But this time, there’s an encouraging strategic awareness among seemingly disparate groups—whether across town or across country—that they’re not really facing separate abuses, but one mega-outrage that’s rampaging over all of us: Corporate power, unbridled and insatiable.

Thus, the present rebellion is bigger and more significant than the usual political/legal struggle to stop the excesses of
CHEERLEADERS

LET’S HEAR IT FOR CHEERLEADERS

SOME OF OUR country’s richest corporations have lobbied to turn our national wage laws into Swiss cheese, rigging them with special loopholes to escape paying even today’s miserly minimum wage. This amounts to wholesale robbery of restaurant workers, farm workers, domestic workers, taxi drivers, and ... pro football cheerleaders.

Yes, even super-rich NFL football teams pay peanuts to their highly publicized cheering squads.

Members of the Oakland Raiders’ squad calculate that their pay works out to less than $5 an hour, while the Cincinnati Bengals’ cheerleaders (who bear the added burden of being called “Ben-Gals”) are paid about $2.85 an hour. Astonishingly, a recent ruling by the Labor Department says that this does not violate federal law.

Why? Because the sports industry got its cheerleaders categorized as “seasonal amusement” employees—a loophole that exempts them from our national pay rules.

Fed up, members of the Oakland Raiderettes cheerleading squad have sued the team for gross labor violations. You’d think the billionaire owners of these sports kingdoms would be embarrassed to be exposed as cheapskate exploiters of women.

Instead, the Raiders maintain that, thanks to a sneaky “mandatory arbitration” proviso in the ladies’ employment contracts, the cheerleaders must submit any complaints to a private arbiter.

And who would that be? Why the NFL commissioner himself, whose $44-million-a-year salary is paid by the teams’ owners! Which is why these indefatigable women are challenging not only the wage abuse, but also the abuse we all suffer from absurd corporate-rigged forced arbitration.

People are no longer hoodwinked by the rhetorical robes of civic virtue that corporations have wrapped around themselves: Society’s Producers! Job Creators! Engines of Shared Prosperity! Nor are the global giants hailed as “our companies,” sources of pride for our communities and culture. Rather, top executives and Wall Street financiers have turned the word “corporation” into a social epithet, describing a hostile, bullying behemoth that’s out for itself, caring nothing about hiring people, fair wages, local businesses, gender inequality, the community’s water and air, our children’s future, the law, democracy, or even our country.

So people today are rising up not merely to challenge particular abuses by this beast, but the beast itself—i.e., the corporate order. Momentous questions are being asked, not just by activists, but by regular folks:

- **Who elected** these manipulative profit-seekers to run our country and our lives?
- **Are we to be sovereign citizens** of the USA, or have we been shanghaied to CorporateLand to be their drudge workers and mindless consumers?
- **If money is speech,** doesn’t that mean speech is no longer free?
- **Why should corporate “rights” ever be superior to human rights and the Common Good?**

Such sensible expressions of dismay are summed up by a popular bumper sticker that asks: “Where are we going? And what am I doing in this handbasket?”

These fundamental questions strike the oligarchy at its jerry-built conceptual base. The questions answer themselves, allowing all to see the flaws in the establishment’s carefully contrived conventional wisdom that corporations are efficient meritocracies whose executives are best suited to be the overseers of our nation’s economy, government, and future. The growing number of people and groups now rebelling against that “wisdom” are not seeking a more pleasing coat of paint for the corporate structure, but new structures to advance the People’s democratic control.

This is a time of transformative possibilities. Already, hundreds of these feisty, innovative grassroots uprisings are flowering across our land, enlisting millions of us in a common effort to get America out of the corporate handbasket.

This month, the *Lowdown* highlights three of the groups that illustrate the progress and possibilities of this emergent Populist movement.

**UNION WORKERS CONGRESS.** Hard work, we’re told, always pays off. Sure it does—as a farmworker, a roofer, or a home health aide. In our economy, those doing the hardest work get the worst pay, the weakest job protections, the least respect, and zero say in the way things work. Such laborers are the downest and outest people in our country’s workforce, totally vulnerable to the boss’ whims and not even allowed the legal right to organize for better treatment.

**So what can they do? Organize!**

To hell with taking no for an answer. Although these workers are poorly paid and treated, they’re rich in spirit. Told that they weren’t allowed to organize, they went out and did it anyway. Groups like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida’s vast agribusiness fields, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance have formed within occupational categories to rally and be advocates for millions of the hard-hit, previously voiceless, and largely invisible people who do the back-breaking, sweaty, insecure, exhausting, and thankless—yet essential—labor in our society.

Just bonding together as common laborers in this field or that has been a remarkable achievement. More remarkable (and quite astonishing to employers who’ve been free to exploit this “hidden” workforce), the bonds have held and attracted others to join, because the groups’ actions have produced real results—from wage increases and bargaining rights to public recognition and some respect.

Now comes the most remarkable advance by these groups of “powerless” workers: They have recognized the greater power of coalition—a lesson that the larger, richer, established progressive groups need to learn, pronto. Four years ago at a gathering in Detroit, a “group of groups” organized themselves into the United Workers Congress (www.unitedworkerscongress.org), including nine occupational sectors: Day laborers, domestic workers, farm workers, formerly incarcerated workers, guest workers, restaurant workers, workers in “right-to-work (for less)” states, taxi drivers, and workfare workers.

This year, adjunct college professors (see last month’s *Lowdown*) became the 10th sector in UWC’s coalition.

What they have in common is that all are excluded, either by explicit government policy or duplicitous employers, from the right to organize and bargain collectively for just treatment on the job. Instead of demanding that this right be extended to them as a legal matter, the coalition has elevated its demand to a moral level, reframing the right to organize as a fundamental human right that belongs to everyone and cannot be abrogated by law.

The human rights construct lets UWC members take their campaigns directly to the public, where their calls for justice resonate and get better support than they would inside a courtroom or legislative hall. After all, as the coalition notes, “The problems facing excluded workers are not theirs alone. The struggles they face—low wages, unstable employment, and no labor protections to speak of—are the struggles of growing numbers of working class people in the United States.”

With a dash of gumption and a sharp sense of old time labor outrage, the “un-organizable” are organizing. Then, with no phony hang-ups about protecting “our turf” these young insurgent groups recognized the obvious: By teaming up they could, in their words, “leverage power and resources that would otherwise be impossible with one sector or alliance on their own.” While that’s obvious, most progressive groups have seemed allergic to doing it, so there’s another lesson the young are teaching.

Also, UWC is reaching beyond our borders to strengthen their coalition. Knowing that New Deal labor law will not protect them and that relentless,
low-wage globalization by multinational corporations won't be stopped by appeals to corporate patriotism, the groups are forging global alliances with unions, students, human rights organizations, and others. For example, they helped create a Walmart Supply Chain Organizing Committee that links to activists wherever Walmart goes; UWC joined the Asia Floor Wage Alliance to help gain a minimum standard of pay for garment workers across Asia; and the coalition organized a massive Global Day of Action against McDonald’s last year in more than 30 countries. Whether here at home or around the globe, UWC organizes its campaigns on the moral high ground of basic human rights.

Those who are wondering how we build a full-fledged Populist movement to contend with the overall rise of oligarchic corporate power in our country, would be smart to go to school with the United Workers Congress.

COMMUNITY RIGHTS. Washington has shown that it doesn’t really care what ordinary, workaday families think or need, and most governors and state legislatures are just as aloof. So it’s to the local level we must go, entering through the doors of self-government at city and town halls (cue the soaring music and fluttering flags) where “The People decide!” Right? Where “The People decide!” Right?

In recent years, denizens of cities and towns from sea to shining sea have been stunned to wake up and discover that their right to make critical policy decisions for themselves in their own communities has been usurped by corporations. How this happened is a long story of corporate skullduggery and political perfidy, but here’s the nub of it: First, beginning in 1819, corporatist judges (led by the Supreme Court’s first judicial activist, John Marshall) created and expanded the absurd doctrine that the interests of property “rights” of private business corporations are created and expanded the doctrine that the Supreme Court’s first judicial activist, John Marshall (which is what a corporation is) over the people’s interest in self-government; second, state and national lawmakers have implemented this doctrine by blithely enacting hundreds of laws that preempt the authority of local governments to restrict corporate abuses in their localities—even when those abuses endanger the public’s health and natural resources.

What if your community chooses to stop Waste Management Corporation from dumping out-of-state toxics on you; protect your area’s organic farms from contamination by Monsanto’s GMO Frankencrops; keep Nestlé from sucking up your water supply; prevent Smithfield Foods from contaminating your community’s air and water with a massive hog factory; or reject Exxon’s scheme to frack your city? No, no, no, and no, authorities have told locals in case after case—not only has your citizen’s right to rule on such matters been preempted by the state, but any effort by you to ban such profit-making activity violates the “rights” of corporations.

Have we no recourse? Of course we do: Defiance! More than 150 local governments—from cities like Pittsburgh to rural areas like Mora County, New Mexico—have already passed “community rights ordinances” that reassert people’s fundamental right to (1) protect the health, safety, and welfare of their residents and their natural resources, (2) promote environmental and economic sustainability, and (3) enhance the overall quality of life. Two major organizations are working with local officials and coalitions. Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) is presently helping six California cities and counties establish their democratic control over such issues as fracking, local food sovereignty, and setting standards for being a sustainable city.

Nationwide, the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (www.celdf.org) has done the pioneering thinking and is providing legal expertise for this budding community rights movement. CELDF, a nonprofit, public interest law firm established in 1995, has made its legal services available to scores of community groups and local officials who’re confronted by corporate exploiters rate (which is what a corporation is) over the people’s interest in self-government; second, state and national lawmakers have implemented this doctrine by blithely enacting hundreds of laws that preempt the authority of local governments to restrict corporate abuses in their localities—even when those abuses endanger the public’s health and natural resources.

The elites sniff that they’re merely making rightful use of amounts to a tax shelter. The Accountability Office found that US corporations pay an average tax rate of only 12.6 percent.

They do that through ridiculous loopholes in our tax laws. Take, for instance, the subsidy for corporate criminals. JPMorgan Chase was fined more than $20 billion last year; its honchos deducted that “punishment” from the corporate tax bill, claiming it as a cost of doing business. If you get a speeding ticket, do you get to deduct the fine from the income tax you owe? Hah! Meanwhile, Caterpillar, Inc., quietly shifted some $8 billion in profits into a Swiss subsidiary to avoid paying more than $2 billion owed to our country. Even though this subsidiary has only 65 employees and neither makes nor sells spare parts, Caterpillar was able to channel 85 percent of its international parts profits into what amounts to a tax shelter.

The elites sniff that they’re merely making rightful use of the deductions allowed by tax laws. But it’s their lawyers who wrote those laws to legalize their thievery! We pay for their wrongdoing, their fines—and their lawyers.

LOOPY LOOPHOLES

DID YOU SCRAMBLE to get your taxes done this year? Yeah, me, too.

I don’t mind paying what I owe, but I hate having to cover the taxes that should be paid by the likes of JPMorgan Chase and Caterpillar, Inc. Those are just two of the astonishingly profitable corporations that walk their tax tabs each year, putting the cost of everything from the military to our national parks onto the rest of us.

CEOs and their congressional hirelings wail about the “punishing” tax rate of 35 percent assessed on corporate profits. But most corporations pay nowhere near that. The latest assessment by the Government Accountability Office found that US corporations pay an average tax rate of only 12.6 percent.

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exploiters and compliant state authorities.

Its skilled staff not only helps communities assert their right to local self-government, but they’re also expanding their grassroots organizing through State Community Rights Networks that are now operating in Colorado, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington State. In Colorado, where five communities have banned fracking in the past year, the state’s community rights network is proposing an initiative for a constitutional amendment that establishes community rights over corporate rights, giving municipalities specific authority to ban fracking within their borders. Needless to say, this is driving frackers bonkers, and they’ve sent a stampede of lawyers into courts to try to keep the initiative off of November’s ballot, thus doubling down on their disdain for democracy. But, so far, they have failed to prevent people from voting on it.

The community rights movement is unabashed about its goal: “To transition from merely regulating corporate harms to stopping those harms by asserting local, democratic control directly over corporations.”

That is pure, full-bore Populism, and it is precisely the sort of big, substantive, structural change that people want to see and that progressives should be proposing across the board, because it will actually produce... well, change. Rather than continue trying to tie little regulatory slipknots around the inherent abusiveness of huge corporate powers, we should go right at their power. At least by proposing such reforms, we can shift the public debate onto progressive turf, rally millions who want to build a Populist Movement, and separate those who want real change from those who’re merely mouthing the word. I’d count that as progress.

MORAL MONDAYS. Led by Rev. William Barber of Goldsboro, North Carolina, this broad coalition was created by the spontaneous civic combustion of several local groups outraged by their state government, which the far-out right had captured in 2012 and turned into a laboratory of Koch corporatism, tea party fanatism, and Republican opportunism. Owning the governorship and legislature in the Tar Heel state, these narrow forces have gaily taken a wrecking ball to health care, jobless benefits, education, tax equity, labor law, voter rights, women’s rights, and any semblance of fairness and justice in a Southern state that has taken some pride in its commitment to both.

On a Monday in April of last year, Rev. Barber, who also heads the state NAACP, led a small protest group into North Carolina’s legis-