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Review of John Atlas, "Seeds of Change: The Story of ACORN"

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by: Peter Dreier, *t r u t h o u t* | Book Review

"Seeds of Change: The Story of ACORN, America's Most Controversial Antipoverty Community Organizing Group"
John Atlas
(Vanderbilt University Press, 2010)

"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crises maintain their neutrality" - Dante

Six weeks after the first oil spewed out of BP's wells in the Gulf Coast, President Obama said he was ready to "kick ass" to pressure the company to fix the damage. We don't usually associate presidents with kicking ass. That's the job of social movements. Indeed, the evidence so far shows that Obama, like most liberal politicians, is most likely to get tough on business abuses when people are protesting in the streets demanding corporate responsibility.

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That inside-outside strategy is how all progressive reforms - from the eight-hour day to the Voting Rights Act, from women's suffrage to the

Party movement).

No group was better at kicking ass, and playing that inside-outside game, than ACORN. That's the story that John Atlas tells in his fascinating new book, "Seeds of Change: The Story of ACORN, America's Most Controversial Antipoverty Community Organizing Group," published by Vanderbilt University Press.

"Seeds of Change" is full of fascinating people, colorful anecdotes and political drama, but it is really a story about the hard, but hopeful, work of bringing about progressive change. Atlas writes about activists, organizers and ordinary people learning how to fight for, and win, better living and working conditions. It is a book about the poor that doesn't treat them as victims or stereotypes, but as people who, by joining with others in politics and protest, can shape their own destiny, by changing government policy and corporate practices.

Atlas shows how ACORN revolutionized the field of community organizing by creating an organization that could wage battles at the local, state and national levels. He profiles Wade Rathke, a welfare rights organizer in Massachusetts, who in 1970, moved to Arkansas to create a new inter-racial organization that would organize poor and working-class people around jobs, veterans benefits, utility prices, and other issues. With the help of idealistic college graduates and up-from-poverty activists, Rathke built ACORN into a powerful organization that, by 2008, had chapters in 38 cities and 400,000 members.

With unprecedented access to ACORN's staff, leaders, board members and archives, as well as interviews with the group's political allies and enemies, Atlas presents a colorful and dramatic portrait of the obstacles and opportunities for grassroots activism. His readable narrative shows how ACORN recruited low-income residents to engage in local battles for better schools, parks, housing and police protection, which often gave people the self-confidence they needed to

strengthening laws against bank redlining and an increase in the minimum wage. Because of its deep roots in urban neighborhoods, ACORN warned policymakers about the dangers of predatory lending and the possible foreclosure epidemic years before it became front-page news.

In one of the most fascinating chapters, Atlas uncovers how the leaders of ACORN's large New Orleans chapter organized the victims of Hurricane Katrina to successfully demand a voice in the relief and reconstruction efforts by local, state and federal officials. More than any other group, ACORN played a key role in ongoing efforts to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward and to reach out to the Katrina diaspora scattered throughout Louisiana, Texas, and elsewhere.

Atlas also reports on ACORN's cunning "homesteading" campaign in Philadelphia in the 1970s that involved members illegally taking over blocks of abandoned housing in order to pressure local officials to direct funding for repairs and rehabilitation. He describes ACORN's bold and successful campaign to pass a statewide referendum in November 2004 to raise Florida's minimum wage by a dollar an hour. Despite being dramatically outspent by Disney and other corporate giants, ACORN built a coalition of unions, faith groups, and others that scored a whopping 72 to 28 percent (4.95 million votes to 1.96 million) victory, far larger than George W. Bush's 300,000 majority over John Kerry in the state that same day.

"Seeds of Change" also recounts the "battle of Brooklyn" that pitted ACORN against one of the city's most politically-connected developers, Forest City, that planned to build a megaproject - including a new arena for an NBA basketball team, luxury housing, and high-rise offices - at Atlantic Yards. ACORN threatened to stop the project if developer Bruce Ratner didn't include a significant number of housing units affordable to poor and working-class tenants. ACORN won that fight, forced Ratner to make significant concessions and then become an advocate for the project. In doing so,

As Atlas describes in this lively book, ACORN learned the art of playing the inside-outside game. Although it was best-known as a kick-ass activist group, it also formed alliances with sympathetic politicians and even some corporations willing to negotiate with ACORN to avoid being the target of protest. As a result, ACORN was able to pass living wage laws in dozens of cities, get voters and legislators in a dozen states to raise the minimum wage and pressure local politicians to strengthen tenants' rights laws and adopt policies to stem the tide of foreclosures.

Atlas devotes a chapter of "Seeds of Change" to the ACORN-affiliated Working Families Party, which has groomed activists to run for city and state offices in New York, helped them win elections and played an important role in building a progressive coalition with labor unions and other groups.

Not everything went smoothly. Atlas recalls an incident during the 2001 New York City mayoral race where ACORN and the Working Families Party had to weather a controversy over its alleged criticism of Rev. Al Sharpton, which almost destroyed the group's relationship with New York's African-American community.

Atlas, like ACORN's leaders, expected Obama's victory in 2008 to give the organization even greater influence. After all, ACORN had worked with Obama when he was a young legislator in Illinois and it had helped register voters in key swing states that Obama needed to beat John McCain.

But during the campaign and soon after Obama took office, ACORN became the target of a right-wing assault that it was unprepared for and, ultimately, unable to survive. Atlas reports on what he describes as the "tragedy" of ACORN's downfall, engineered in part by Karl Rove, George W. Bush's top political adviser, who saw in ACORN's successful large-scale voter registration efforts a real threat to GOP candidates. Starting in 2004 and accelerating during the 2008

enough - backed up by nuisance suits filed by GOP activists and officials - that it sullied ACORN's reputation.

The GOP's war against ACORN was compounded by two mistakes of judgment by ACORN's own staff. One was the embezzlement of ACORN funds by Rathke's brother Dale, who served as the group's accountant. Trying to protect his brother, Wade Rathke hid the scandal from ACORN's board. It only came to light in September 2008 when The New York Times broke the story, probably leaked by an ACORN insider. The other was the negative publicity generated when two right-wing activists - the woman of the duo dressed like a prostitute - visited ACORN offices around the country and asked for help. The duo secretly videotaped the conservatives, doctored them to make it appear that ACORN staff were engaging in illegal activity (assisting the couple in setting up a prostitution ring) and became instant right-wing heroes when the tapes showed up on Fox News and became a national controversy.

Egged on by the right-wing media and right-wing GOP politicians like Congressman Darrell Issa, the mainstream media failed to treat the video scandal with any of their typical skepticism. Within months, many of ACORN's supporters - including Democratic politicians and liberal foundations - abandoned the organization. In September 2009, the House voted 345-75 to ban all federal funding for ACORN. All 173 Republicans and 172 of the 247 Democrats voted against ACORN. These acts of cowardice certainly reflect badly on liberal Democrats, who ran away from ACORN faster than they accept campaign contributions from banks and oil companies. (Indeed, the Democrats' "yes" vote for the resolution to defund ACORN stands in stark contrast to their unwillingness to withdraw federal contracts from real corporate criminals like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Fed Ex, Dell and KBR, which, according to the Project on Oversight and Government Reform, have actually violated federal laws).

The Democrats and the donors abandoned ACORN before all the facts

which needs all the kick-ass activism it can muster, and for liberal Democrats, who need groups like ACORN to play the "outside" game.

Atlas's history of ACORN is sympathetic to the controversial group, but does not shy away from exposing its weaknesses, clashes over strategy, internal power struggles, tensions between white Ivy League organizers and a membership of mostly blacks and Latinos, as well as ACORN's trouble with staff turnover. Atlas' account of the Rathke embezzlement scandal is a fascinating inside story that you won't find in The New York Times, on CCN or on Fox News.

Atlas' complex tale of ACORN will likely stir up debates about community organizing, how we might address a real war on poverty and why a progressive movement is essential if we are to bring about significant change in America. "Seeds of Change" is an essential read for anyone concerned about democracy and social justice.

Although Atlas recounts ACORN's rise and fall, "Seeds of Change" does not end on a downer note. Atlas shows how, over the years, ACORN has been a real school for democracy, training thousands of activists, who, even after leaving ACORN, continued to work as effective organizers for hundreds of community groups, unions, environmental organizations, and other public interest groups. Many ACORN veterans worked as key staff for elected officials and some became successful politicians themselves. Atlas also notes that ACORN's willingness to experiment with different strategies and approaches has changed the field of organizing in numerous ways.

Finally, Atlas observes that while ACORN may be dead, its offspring are continuing to organize. In more than a dozen states, ACORN's former leaders and staff are building new progressive community organizing groups to carry on the work of kicking ass to strengthen American democracy.

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Peter Dreier is professor of politics and chair of the Urban and environmental policy program at Occidental College, where he teaches a course on community organizing.



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