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POLITICS

20 Activists Who Are Changing America

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In my recent interview with Bill Moyers, we discussed the growing activism on economic, social, and environmental justice issues that is sweeping the country. Drawing lessons from my book, The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame, I observed that the United States is now at a critical turning point, with the "unholy alliance" of Wall Street, the Chamber of Commerce, the Tea Party, and the Religious Right unraveling in front of us, creating openings for progressives to challenge the corporate and conservative establishment. In this article, I identify some of the most effective young grassroots organizers who are changing America.

You might not know it if your only source of information is the mainstream media, but there's a vibrant grassroots progressive movement winning victories, raising awareness and changing lives in every part of the country. In the midst of a widening economic divide, a corporate assault on working families' living standards, and the right-wing Tea Party grip on the GOP, millions of Americans are fighting back, in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and voting booths, to restore democracy and challenge the plutocracy.

Many of the leaders of these efforts are Baby Boomer veterans of the civil rights, anti-war, women's rights, consumer and environmental movements. But in the past decade, a new generation of activists -- born after 1960 -- has stepped into positions of leadership in the mosaic of movements that has emerged to continue and widen the struggle for social and economic justice. They are learning from the successes, and the mistakes, of their elders.

Like their predecessors in the Progressive movement in the early 1900s, the Depression-era struggles for workers' rights, and the 1960s and 1970s crusades, this new crop of activists knows that the radical ideas of one generation are often the common sense ideas of the next generation. They are practical idealists.

The stories and people that will fill tomorrow's history books are being written today. It is sometimes hard to recognize history-making as it is occurring. So we need to remind ourselves that a new generation of activists, now in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, are building on the experiences of their earlier counterparts, continuing America's progressive tradition.

Who are the young (50 and under) radicals and reformers among us now whose names may not be well-known to the general public, but whose activism is changing the country in a more progressive direction? There are thousands to choose from. Here is just a sample:

Rev. William J. Barber II

Rev. Dr. William Barber II, president of the North Carolina NAACP, catalyzed a new progressive movement through "Moral Monday" protests against the conservative take-over of state politics. The first protest at the state capital building in Raleigh in April attracted a modest crowd of supporters. Seventeen people engaged in civil disobedience and were arrested. But the "Moral Monday" movement grew quickly, each week attracting larger and larger crowds -- sometimes topping 10,000 protesters -- and branching out to other cities and towns across North Carolina. Over an 18-week period, about 1,000 people were arrested to draw attention to politicians who have slashed unemployment compensation for 170,000 people, increased taxes on the poor and middle class while cutting them for the wealthy individuals and large corporations, turned down federal Medicaid funds for half a million residents, enacted harsh anti-abortion legislation, severely cut education funds, and adopted the nation's strictest voter suppression law.

Barber, 50, has served as pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, in Goldsboro, N.C. since 1993. Elected head of the state NAACP in 2005, he led a voter registration effort that added more than 442,000 new voters. As the public face of the Moral Mondays movement, Barber, a brilliant orator, has ignited a broad coalition that will have a lasting impact. "We have a new demographic emerging that is changing the South," explains Barber, who received his bachelor's degree in political science from N.C. Central University, a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University, and a doctorate from Drew University with a concentration in public policy and pastoral care.

"The one thing they don't want to see is us crossing over racial lines and class lines and gender lines and labor lines," says Barber. "When this coalition comes together, you're going to see a New South."

Aaron Bartley

In 2004, after graduating from Harvard Law School (where he co-founded the Harvard Living Wage Campaign) and working as an organizer for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Bartley returned to Buffalo, New York, his hometown, to become a community organizer. Many of Bartley's friends thought that his idea was naïve and quixotic. After all, Buffalo was the quintessential "rust belt" city, devastated by a dramatic half-century loss of blue-collar jobs and population.

Within less than a decade, however, Bartley's vision has become at least a partial reality. People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) -- the group he founded with Eric Walker -- now has an enviable track record of winning victories that have improved the lives of low-income people on the West Side, a diverse neighborhood with a poverty rate of 45 percent, and a per capita income of \$6,650, that includes blacks and Latinos, as well as one of the nation's largest communities of refugees resettled from Burma, Somalia and Sudan. PUSH has built a solid core of grassroots leaders prepared to contest for both political and economic power.

"PUSH isn't just about making noise," said Mark Sommer, a *Buffalo News* reporter who has covered the organization. "Its about having concrete goals and winning victories for people."

PUSH organizes residents around issues and projects that improve housing conditions and living wage job opportunities, including a Green Development Zone that combines cutting-edge green construction practices, green jobs training and community organizing around high-impact sustainable economic initiatives. Among its recent successes: two state-level community development programs, the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative and Green Jobs/Green NY, which dramatically expand access to residential weatherization and is projected to create 30,000 green jobs over the next few years. Fueled by the 38-year-old Bartley's vision, PUSH is also creating an urban land trust to acquire abandoned properties and redevelop them as low-income limited-equity cooperative apartments.

Lucas Benitez

Born in Mexico, Lucas Benitez at 17 moved to Immokalee, Florida, to work in the tomato fields, where he seethed over the mistreatment, lousy pay and backbreaking working conditions. (Florida growers produce almost half of the nation's \$1.3 billion annual tomato crop). As cofounder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Benitez has become a leader in the struggle to end exploitation in America's agricultural fields. CIW began in 1992; a few years later, Benitez, now 37, helped organize a strike of more than 3,000 Mexican, Central American and Haitian workers.

In 2001, CIW launched its Campaign for Fair Food -- forging an alliance between farmworkers and consumers, including student, religious, environmental, and labor groups. CIW scored its first major victory in 2005, when Taco Bell agreed to improve wages and working conditions in response to a national consumer boycott. So far ten giant retail food chains and supermarkets -- including Aramark, Bon Appetit, Burger King, Chipotle Mexican Grill, Compass Group, McDonald's, Sodexo, Subway, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and Yum Brands -- have signed binding agreements with CIW that require growers to pass along an extra penny a pound to workers, raising average annual wages from \$10,000 to \$17,000. (Wendy's and Publix supermarkets are still hold outs and targets of CIW-led protests).

CIW's efforts have also forged a new approach to corporate social responsibility. Through its Fair Food Program, CIW has persuaded major food corporations to agree to purchase tomatoes only from the 26 participating growers (who account for 90 percent of tomato industry revenues) who have signed a code of conduct and agree to regular audits of its workplace practices, including pay, sexual harassment, and other labor issues. CIW conducts worker education sessions on the farms and on company time to insure that workers understand their new rights under the Fair Food Code of Conduct.

Deepak Bhargava

A few days after Sarah Palin attacked Obama's experience as a community organizer in her speech at the GOP convention, Bhargava penned an op-ed column in the *New York Times*, "Organizing Principles: What Do Community Organizers Do?" to explain the important work that grassroots activists do in cities and towns across America.

As Executive Director of the DC-based Center for Community Change, Bhargava, now 45, coordinates a large network of local community organizing groups engaged in a wide variety of issues. After working for ACORN, Bhargava joined CCC in 1994 and has energized the organization by recruiting a young and diverse staff, leading campaigns to address America's poverty crisis and its fraying social safety net. CCC provides support and training to local and state-level groups like Promise Arizona and the Ohio Organizing Collaborative to bring the often-fragmented progressive groups together around a common vision and strategy.

"Social movements have to be a combination of a big, inspiring national vision, but grounded in local struggles and local fights," says Bhargava, who immigrated to the United States from India, grew up in New York City, and graduated from Harvard. Several years ago, Bhargava helped bring together local immigrant rights activists to expand the campaign for federal reform, focusing on identifying, training, and mobilizing young people, often called "Dreamers." With CCC's help, they created the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM), pushing for changes in the nation's immigration laws. Along with hundreds of other activists, he was recently arrested as part of a civil disobedience action in Washington, D.C. for immigration rights.

Jenn Brown

Brown, 32, is the Executive Director of Battleground Texas, a grassroots organization working to make Texas politics competitive again after over twenty years of Republican one-party rule. Its goal is to turn Texas into a battleground state by treating it like one -- registering new voters and engaging Texans to make sure they not only turn out on Election Day but that they also become more involved in the political process to ensure their voices and the voices of their communities are heard.

Recognizing that one of the keys to creating a more competitive state is increasing the number of Texans who turn out to vote,

in just seven months, Battleground Texas has helped over 3,500 Texans become Volunteer Deputy Registrars under the most restrictive voter registration laws in the country, so they can help engage potential voters in their communities. Brown and Battleground Texas are now working to build the infrastructure necessary for strong candidates like state Senator Wendy Davis to run and win in the Lone Star State.

Brown is a northern California native and a 2003 graduate of the University of California, San Diego, where she served as Student Government President. She attended a training program for budding community organizers at the Midwest Academy, and honed those skills working with the United States Student Association. In 2008, she was Minnesota State Director for the Obama campaign, then managed nine states during the 2010 mid-term election cycle as an organizer with Organizing for America. Last year she served as field director for Obama for America in the crucial state of Ohio, where she oversaw a team of over 600 field staff and 130 offices.

"People can change the world for the better," Brown observes. "All we have to do is help them understand the power they have and the tools they need to do it."

Patricia Castellanos

In Los Angeles, organizer Patricia Castellanos led an unlikely coalition of the Teamsters, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the L.A. Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), and local public health and community groups to clean up the country's largest (and until recently, the filthiest) port area. More than 40 percent of the goods that come into the country use the adjacent ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Ships and trucks spew toxic pollutants that result in high cancer and asthma rates, particularly in nearby communities and among the port's more than 10,000 truck drivers. Every year port-related pollution in Greater LA causes 1,200 deaths -- a statistic directly connected to the miserable working conditions for drivers, who cannot afford the high cost of maintaining their trucks.

"We realized that issues affecting workers and communities are inextricably linked," explained Castellanos, 43, the daughter of Mexican immigrant factory workers and a graduate of Cal State Long Beach. After a two-year campaign by the coalition, the city's Harbor Commission adopted the Clean Truck Program, which has reduced toxic emissions by 90 percent. The campaign, which has also improved conditions for some drivers, has sparked similar efforts in other ports across the country.

A community organizer since 1995, Castellanos is now a deputy director at LAANE and was recently appointed by newly-elected L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti to the Los Angeles Harbor Commission.

Teresa Cheng

Cheng, now 26, first became involved in labor rights activism at the University of Southern California, where she led an anti-sweatshop campaign that culminated into the occupation of the university's president's office. As a national organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops, she trained and coordinated a network of student labor organizations across the country to wage several successful campaigns in solidarity with unions to demand that global corporations respect workers' rights.

One of Cheng's first efforts was to mobilize a national campaign to pressure Russell Athletics (which produces college-licensed apparel) to rehire 1,200 Honduran workers who it had fired (and closed the factory) after they voted to unionize. USAS also picketed the National Basketball Association (NBA) finals in Orlando, Florida, and Los Angeles to protest the NBA's own licensing agreement with Russell. In addition, students distributed leaflets inside Sports Authority stores and sent Twitter messages to customers of the Dick's Sporting Goods chain, urging them to boycott Russell products. Cheng helped arrange a letter signed by sixty-five members of Congress, who voiced "grave concern about reports of severe violations" of workers' rights at Russell. Russell agreed to rehire the workers, open a new plant in Honduras as a unionized factory, and pledged not to fight efforts by workers to unionize at the company's seven other factories in the country.

Working through USAS, Cheng helped mobilized student activists on about 100 campuses who persuaded their universities to sever licensing agreements with Russell. Following her tenure at USAS, she lived in Honduras, working with the Central General de Trabajadores to forge a global alliance of workers at Adidas contract factories around the world. A dozen garment worker unions, from Honduras to Bangladesh, have now formed the International Union League for Brand Responsibility, demanding that German sportswear giant Adidas bargain directly with the subcontracted workers who sew their clothes and guarantee living wages, safe factories, and stable jobs. This month the campaign heated up with Adidas contract factory workers staging coordinated protests from Jakarta to Bangalore to San Salvador.

Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins

Ellis-Lamkins, 37, remembers when her mother, a single mom who was occasionally on welfare and fed her two daughters with food stamps, got a union job that lifted her family out of poverty.

"When you leave that reality of poverty, it is one of the most joyous feelings in the world," she recalled, explaining why she's devoted her career to progressive organizing. "The labor movement has been the most effective anti-poverty program in American history."

After graduating from California State University-Northridge, Ellis-Lamkins worked for SEIU, organizing home care workers and other low-wage employees. By 2003, at 26, she became the head of the San Jose-based South Bay Labor Council, which boasts 110 unions and 110,000 members. She soon became known as the "the Robin Hood of the Silicon Valley."

Through the Labor Council and Working Partnership (a labor-community coalition that Ellis-Lamkins chaired), she worked to make sure that the area's dot-com prosperity was widely shared. She led a successful campaign for a local living wage law, helped elect progressives to local offices, pushed local officials to include "community benefit agreements" as part of

development projects, and joined forces with business groups to form Team San Jose, a nonprofit organization to operate the city's convention center, the civic auditorium and several arts venues in order to guarantee good-paying union jobs.

In 2009, Ellis-Lamkins became head of Green For All, a DC-based group that brings unions and environmentalists together to push for anti-poverty measures and a clean-energy economy. With close ties to the Obama administration, Ellis-Lamkins led the fight to include two key provisions -- funds for job training and and focus on green jobs -- in the House's climate and energy bill: Under her leadership Green For All has helped states like Washington and New Mexico, and cities like Portland and Seattle, implement green jobs and energy-efficiency programs. While focusing on jobs, Ellis-Lamkins recognizes the additional public health burdens confronted by poor and minority communities, where the disproportionate amount of toxic waste is located and which accounts for high cancer rates, asthma rates and other environmental health problems. "The racial disparity in toxic dumping continues," she observed, "and federal regulators have not done enough to stop it."

She says: "Getting people to care about what happens to the planet when they are worried about dinner tonight is one of the greatest challenges we face."

Jennifer Epps-Addison

Over the past 15 years, Jennifer Epps-Addison has organized a number of successful campaigns on a variety of economic and social justice issues in Wisconsin. "The work that I've focused on centers around passing policies that keep workers and their families at the center," Epps-Addison said.

In 2009, she led the charge for Milwaukee's MORE ordinance, which established that 40 percent of all construction jobs on publicly funded projects would go to city residents. Last year, she led a campaign to pass the Milwaukee Jobs Act, which created entry-level construction opportunities for unemployed city residents. She also championed paid sick days as well as in-state tuition for all state colleges for undocumented immigrants.

Epps-Addison says that in her work organizing low-wage employees, she has met many people with two or three jobs who still can't afford to see a doctor and are forced to rely on public assistance. "That is not the America that I was raised to believe in," she says.

When she was growing up, Epps-Addison says, America was still investing in its middle class and her own family was an example of the benefits of this investment. Her father was the son of a sharecropper from the South and her grandmother started picking cotton at the age of five, leaving school after the sixth grade. Her grandmother later moved to Milwaukee and worked in a factory.

"She was on public assistance, which provided a stable enough life for my dad so he could focus on school. She was never rich but she was able to send her son to law school. This country invested in them ... but at some point we decided that we were going to subsidize corporations. We see record profits in the fast food and retail industries, for example, but workers are falling farther and farther behind."

Currently, Epps-Addison is leading a coalition of community groups, labor unions and elected officials who are working to raise wages and standards for Wisconsin workers. She is also the vice president of the Milwaukee Workers Organizing Committee (MWOC), a recently established low-wage workers union.

Epps-Addison took on a new job in September as executive director of Wisconsin Jobs Now, a nonprofit that focuses on improving workers' wages and working conditions. Before community organizing, she worked as an attorney for the Milwaukee Trial Office of the Wisconsin state public defender.

Epps-Addison says she still believes in the American dream and that everyone should have an opportunity to pursue it. But, she says, much work needs to be done: "I believe that my generation has a responsibility to reclaim this country and our democracy." Thankfully, activists and leaders like Epps-Addison are pushing for that.

Leah Fried and Armando Robles

In December 2008, organizer Leah Fried and local union president Armando Robles led 240 workers to illegally occupy their Chicago workplace after their employer, Republic Windows and Doors, abruptly told them that it was shutting down the factory, denying employees severance and vacation pay they had earned.

Fried is a third generation union organizer. A graduate of Earlham College, in 1997 she began working for the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers union (known as the UE), a feisty union with a long radical tradition. Six years later she helped organize the Republic workers into the union. Robles, who was born in Mexico, came to the United States at 18, and had worked as a maintenance mechanic at Republic for eight years, emerged as the catalyst among the employees, who soon elected him their union president

The workers' take-over was hardly spontaneous. Fried, now 41, and Robles, now 43, had learned of the potential shut-down, informed the employees, and developed a plan. When the official word came from the CEO that the company was closing the plant, the workers were ready. Their protest became front-page news after Barack Obama, still the president-elect, voiced support for the workers. Under Robles and Fried's leadership, the union reached a \$1.75 million settlement with the bank that had cancelled the firm's credit. The company sold the factory to another owner, the plant remained open, and the workers kept their jobs and their union contract.

In 2012, the new owner, Serious Energy, announced it was shutting the plant. Again, the workers occupied the factory -- this time with the support of Occupy Chicago -- and after only 12 hours won a commitment from the owner to keep the factory open for three more months and then sell it to the workers. At Robles' initiative, and with the help of their union, the workers

formed and incorporated New Era Windows, a worker-run cooperative, and began to raise the funds needed to buy the machinery from their former employer and keep producing windows, and their good jobs, under the new arrangement. It is now open for business.

George Goehl

In 2010, as the foreclosure epidemic persisted, George Goehl, executive director of National People's Action (NPA), and SEIU organizer Stephen Lerner brought unions, community organizations and faith groups together to pressure banks and the Obama administration to do more for families losing their homes. As the New Bottom Line coalition, they mounted protests at bank headquarters around the country, generating media attention and helping Attorneys General Eric Schneiderman of New York and Kamala Harris of California successfully push for a stronger national settlement with several major banks, which resulted in over \$25 million in foreclosure relief.

The emergence of Occupy Wall Street strengthened the coalition's hand, so Goehl worked with the New Bottom Line and others to sustain the momentum with explicit demands for foreclosure relief, fair taxes, student debt relief and campaign finance reform. The coalition trained about 100,000 recruits in civil disobedience and organized protests at the headquarters and stockholder meetings of Cigna, General Electric, Bank of America and other corporations. Last year Goehl led more than 1,000 people in a protest at Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's suburban home to demand that he and the Obama administration support a financial speculation tax on banks and require banks to help families with underwater mortgages refinance their loans. As a result of the grassroots pressure, Obama announced earlier this year that he was replacing Ed DeMarco, a Bush appointee who runs the agency that oversees Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and has stridently opposed government efforts to help homeowners hurt by the Wall Street mortgage meltdown and the dramatic plunge in housing values. So far Congress has not confirmed Obama's pick to replace DeMarco -- Cong. Mel Watt (D-N.C.).

The 44-year-old Goehl has been an organizer for two decades, working with an Indiana housing rights group, a Chicago neighborhood organization and a national immigrant rights coalition. In 2007 he took over the reins at NPA, which had led the movement to pass the landmark anti-redlining Community Reinvestment Act in 1977. Goehl has knit NPA's loose network into a more coherent organization that can juggle local and national issues simultaneously, shepherding NPA into alliances with unions and other activist groups -- a remarkable accomplishment in the turf-conscious world of community organizing.

Sarita Gupta

Gupta is the executive director of Jobs With Justice. With offices in 25 states and 45 communities, Jobs With Justice collaborates with community, student and faith organizations to build a vital labor movement for economic and social justice.

Gupta's career as an organizer began as a student at Mt. Holyoke College. In 1996 she was elected President of the U.S. Student Association (USSA), the nation's oldest and largest grassroots legislative student organization. In that position, she represented over 3.5 million students nationwide at the White House, on Capitol Hill, and at the Department of Education. She joined JWWJ in 2004 as a national field organizer and then headed the group's Chicago office before being named executive director.

JWWJ's variety of organizing efforts include campaigns to protest unjust deportations in Phoenix, fighting unsafe living and working conditions among Jamaican guestworkers in Florida, organizing fast-food workers around the country who launched a one-day strike in July to protest poverty-level wages, and holding a 24-hour fast outside the New York penthouse of Walmart board member Michelle Burns to protest the corporation's abuse of its employees.

Gupta is also the co-director of Caring Across Generations, a coalition of 200 advocacy groups that seeks to provide quality care and dignity for aging Americans, as well as their care-givers.

Brad Lander

Before getting elected to the New York City Council in 2009 -- which he won, on the Democratic Party and Working Families Party tickets, with 70 percent of the vote -- Brad Lander was a community organizer. He's taken those skills with him into city government, viewing his office as a catalyst for community and labor empowerment. He's become a master at the inside/outside game.

After graduating from the University of Chicago and earning a master's degree at the London School of Economics, Lander served for a decade as executive director of the non-profit Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC), garnering national recognition for its combination of grassroots organizing and community development. At the FAC, he oversaw the development of almost 1,000 units of low-cost housing preserve and the renovation of dozens of Brooklyn buildings facing abandonment, organized tenants against evictions and displacement by unscrupulous landlords, and created a successful re-entry program to help ex-prisoners find jobs and housing.

After FAC, Lander spent six years as director of the Pratt Center for Community Development, which works with grassroots groups to strengthen their capacity for organizing and neighborhood improvement. At Pratt, Lander led a successful campaign to create NYC's inclusionary zoning program, which requires developers to set aside 20 percent of their units for low- and moderate-income families and to pay their building service workers a living wage.

On the City Council, Lander, 44, who represents part of Brooklyn, has led the fight for a living wage law, community involvement in the budget process, and a greater focus on the construction and preservation of affordable housing. He has fought successfully to hold banks accountable to communities, to protect manufacturing jobs, and stop tax breaks for millionaires and funding cuts to schools, firehouses, parks, libraries, and day care centers. Lander led the Council's efforts to reform police abuses, including racial profiling, stop-and-frisk practices, and surveillance of innocent Muslims. He cosponsored a bill to create an inspector general's office to monitor the police and "conduct independent reviews of the

department's policies, practices, programs and operations."

Lander is a cofounder and co-chair of the Council's Progressive Caucus and has been working to recruit new candidates with activist credentials to run for office and expand the body's liberal-left wing. With CUNY urban studies professor John Mollenkopf, Lander catalyzed a group of activists and academics to formulate a One City One Future platform, a progressive manifesto for economic development in the city. Lander has played a key role in Bill de Blasio's mayoral campaign and will be one of de Blasio's strongest Council allies.

Kandi Mossett

Earlier this month the Energy Action Coalition and other groups brought over 8,000 activists, including high school and college students, to Pittsburgh for a Power Shift conference to energize the growing youth movement that is mobilizing to address global warming and environmental injustice, including opposition to fracking, the Keystone pipeline, and universities' financial investment in big fossil fuel corporations that are destroying the planet. Many people look to inspiration from Bill McKibben, but the movement's real strength comes from the growing number of young activists who are learning how to translate their idealism into political power. One of the leaders of this burgeoning movement is 34-year-old Kandi Mossett.

Born in North Dakota and raised in an area known today as the Fort Berthold Reservation, Mossett earned a degree in Natural Resource and Park Management from the University of North Dakota, worked in the Park Service for three years, earned a master's in environmental science and policy, and joined the Indigenous Environmental Network as the Tribal Campus Climate Challenge organizer in 2007. She works with over 30 tribal colleges on projects ranging from initiating recycling programs and community tree plantings to small-scale community solar panel installations and community gardens, as well as mobilizing students around issues like the Keystone pipeline and the devastating effects of hydraulic fracturing on native American lands.

Mossett and other activists were successful in shutting down a solid waste disposal pit in the community of White Shield and in relocating displaced residents of the Prairie Winds Trailer Court in the community of New Town.

Ai-Jen Poo

Like farmworkers, most of America's 2.5 million domestic workers -- nannies, housekeepers and caregivers -- are not covered by federal wage, overtime, organizing and other labor laws. Many toil twelve to fifteen hours a day and are paid less than \$200 a week. So it was a major milestone when New York State passed the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2010. At least 200,000 domestic employees, mostly immigrants, are now entitled to a forty-hour workweek with overtime pay, one day of rest per week and three days of paid time off after a year of employment. The law protects them against sexual harassment and entitles them to temporary disability benefits and unemployment insurance.

This unprecedented victory came after a five-year organizing campaign led by Domestic Workers United and one of its founders, 38-year-old Ai-jen Poo. The daughter of immigrants, Poo points out that domestic workers "do the work that makes all other work possible." After graduating from Columbia University and working as a community organizer, Poo helped start DWU in 2000, assisting thousands in getting back pay and challenging other abuses. In 2007 she helped found the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which has grown into a network of groups in nineteen cities and eleven states. Thanks to this organizing work, California passed its own Domestic Workers Bill of Rights earlier this year.

Poo's work parallels the organizing of women like Rose Schneiderman, who helped immigrant women working in early 20th century garment sweatshops organize to improve conditions, challenge corporate priorities, and build alliances with middle-class reformers like Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins.

Ethan Rome

Rome is executive director of Health Care for America Now (HCAN), the nation's largest grassroots health care coalition that led the campaign to pass the Affordable Care Act. Now 50, Rome began his activist career as a community organizer with the Connecticut Citizen Action Group after graduating from Wesleyan University in 1985.

Rome worked for 15 years on community, legislative and political campaigns in the state, including the historic grassroots campaign in 1991 to win a new state income tax. From 1999 to 2009, Rome directed public affairs for the 1.6 million-member American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

During the successful 2009-2010 campaign to win passage of comprehensive health care reform, Rome directed HCAN's polling, paid media and national events. When the health care bill seemed to be stuck in Congress, Rome and HCAN mounted a vigorous grassroots protest movement, targeting the insurance companies as the main culprit in stalling legislation. That movement helped to give Obama a second wind and contributed to pushing the bill through Congress.

After Congress passed Obamacare, HCAN has played a key role in pushing states to implement the law and working with labor, community and other organizations to help Americans sign up for health care insurance.

Angelica Salas

Three years ago, when leaders of the immigrant rights movement met with President Obama in the White House, Angelica Salas challenged the president's claim that his administration was focusing on deporting criminals and other security threats. "No, Mr. President, that's not what's happening," Salas countered. "You're deporting heads of households, mothers and fathers. Young people are sitting in detention centers when they should be sitting in the best universities in the country." Last year, Obama agreed to suspend the deportation of, and grant work permits to, the young "Dreamers" who came here illegally as children.

Salas, the 42-year-old executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), has been a potent force in the struggle for comprehensive immigration reform. One of the national movement's key strategists, she is a powerful speaker, a brilliant organizer, and a remarkable coalition builder who works closely with unions, faith groups, and students, and is no stranger to jail cells as a frequent participant in civil disobedience. She played a key role in several recent major victories in California, including bills allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers' licenses, prohibiting local police from turning over undocumented immigrants to federal officials for possible deportation, and giving undocumented college students access to public financial aid.

Salas views her job as "telling stories" -- giving voice to the immigrants whose lives are often ignored or misrepresented. She sees her own story in those lives. She was smuggled into the country at age 5 by her 14-year-old aunt. They were caught and sent back to Mexico, but they made it across the border on a second try. The family was torn apart again when federal officials raided the sweatshop where her mother worked and deported her. They were eventually reunited in Los Angeles, where Salas grew up. She joined CHIRLA after finishing Occidental College and became director in 1999.

Salas and CHIRLA have established day-laborer job centers, registered more than 75,000 new immigrant voters and led the fight for in-state tuition for undocumented students. Much of CHIRLA's work involves what Salas calls "handing the baton" -- recruiting and training the next generation of activists.

Daniel R. Schlademan

Schlادeman is in charge of fighting the world's largest corporation. As campaign director of Making Change at Walmart -- a project of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union -- the 43-year-old Schlادeman is at the forefront of an innovative global campaign to hold Walmart accountable to its workers and communities.

Schlادeman has been meeting with Walmart employees around the country to help them improve pay and working conditions and build support from community and faith-based allies, including successful campaigns to stop Walmart from opening new stores in cities where their presence would bring down wage levels and displace many locally-owned businesses.

The growing national movement has been on display during the past year as Walmart workers in hundreds of cities went on a one-day strike to draw public attention to the company's poverty-level wages, stingy benefits, and abusive management practices.

Before working to help raise the voices of Walmart employees, Schlادeman, a graduate of Rutgers University, led several of SEIU most successful campaigns among low-wage workers. In Chicago in 2000, Schlادeman helped thousands of once low-wage property service employees in suburban Chicago in winning their first union contract after a successful two-week strike in 2000. In 2006, he directed the Justice for Janitors campaign in Houston, one of the most successful large-scale union organizing drives in the South in recent years. Confronting a right-to-work environment and establishing rights for immigrant workers, many who are undocumented, Schlادeman helped workers win union representation, healthcare and better jobs for more than 5,000 janitors after a successful four-week strike.

Amy Schur

Amy Schur is giving Wall Street a heart attack. As the campaign director for the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), she's been organizing a national campaign to get cities to use their eminent domain powers to seize "underwater" mortgages from banks and resell them to homeowners with affordable monthly payments. Last year ACCE began organizing homeowners in Richmond, California, a blue-collar city of 103,000 in the Bay Area where half the homeowners are underwater. In Richmond, a progressive mayor and city council grabbed the idea to hold Wall Street accountable for crashing the economy and stripping homeowners and communities of their wealth. The idea quickly spread to other cities. Schur, 47, has been traveling around the country, meeting with members of Congress, community activists, unions, and others, to coordinate the campaign. She brings more than 25 years of community organizing experience to this battle.

Schur grew up in a suburb of Boston. At Oberlin College, she led a successful campaign to get Oberlin to divest from the South African government and organized opposition to U.S. support for Central American dictatorships. After college she worked as an organizer for ACORN in Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles from 1988 until 2009, helping low-income people win improvements in housing, job training and other issues.

Almost four years ago she and other activists launched ACCE to build a statewide movement for social and economic justice. The group now has 28 staff persons, 8,400 dues-paying members, an online list of 42,000 supporters, and a number of important victories under its belt, including a statewide homeowners bill of rights, the strongest foreclosure prevention legislation in the country.

The campaign in Richmond, CA is driving Wall Street crazy. Major banks like Wells Fargo and money management firms like PIMCO and Blackrock have poured enormous resources into lobbying, lawsuits, and media campaigns to block the city's plans. They know that over ten million American homeowners are drowning with underwater mortgages and that Richmond is only one of many "hot spots." In 2013, even as home prices began to rise in some parts of the country, the recovery bypassed these areas. If Schur, ACCE and their allies are able to defy Wall Street in Richmond, the idea will spread quickly to other cities. "We hope our city provides a model for other cities," says Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, "and that this becomes a national movement."

Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His latest book is The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame (Nation Books, 2012).

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