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POLITICS

Good Timing for a Progressive Partnership

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Progressive activists sometimes joke that if you put three lefties in the same room you'll soon have five different organizations. Personal egos, ideological splits, and competition for funding often lead to fissures, factions, and "family" disputes among people whose similarities usually outweigh their differences. This fragmentation of progressive forces weakens the overall influence of the progressive movement at a time when corporate America is consolidating its power. So it is good news when progressives not only find ways to work together on specific issue campaigns, but also join forces for the long haul, combining their strengths in order to build a better movement for social justice.

This week, two of the most well-respected national progressives groups -- the Center for Community Change and USAction -- announced that they've formed a new alliance to address the key problems of job loss, inequality, poverty, and the political influence of big business.

The two groups, both of which have headquarters in Washington, D.C., have worked together for years in coalitions on such meat-and-potato issues as health care reform, preserving the nation's safety net and job creation. Now they've taken the next step -- not a merger, but an ongoing partnership.

The executive directors of the two groups announced the partnership Monday on a nationwide conference call with more than 40 major funders and progressive allies. The call was hosted by Bill Vandenburg, Director of Special Initiatives and Partnerships at the Open Society Foundation, and Naomi Walker, who handles strategic partnerships and coalition work as a high-ranking official at the American Federation of State, Community and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Englightend funders and organized labor -- two key components of the social justice movement -- are keenly interested in seeing stronger, permanent progressive infrastructure built at every level -- all the more so in light of the attacks on labor and all progressives we've seen play out over the past two years, particularly in the Midwest. Both CCC and US Action have enviable track records of mounting effective campaigns that combine local grassroots organizing and national policy change.

The partnership comes at a particularly important moment, as the persistence of high rates of unemployment, income disparities, and threatened cuts to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are high of the political radar screen. For more than three decades, CCC has worked primarily on strengthening the capacity of local community groups to push an anti-poverty agenda. It has recently been in the vanguard of efforts to reform the nation's broken immigration system, helping activists from around the country to collaborate on policy and strategy. USAction, which has worked for almost 20 years with its state affiliates on consumer and federal budget issues, including protecting the social safety net, recently began working on immigration issues, too, seeing it as part and parcel of its "Prosperity for All" economic platform.

"As a progressive movement and a country, we're facing some high-stakes issues right now," explained AFSCME's Walker.

As we confront these issues, labor wants and needs to partner with groups that have greater capacity to fight the right wing and advance a progressive economic agenda. The climate we're in right now demands greater collaboration and

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partnerships. This strategic partnership is a step in the right direction to winning national campaigns.

CCC Executive Director Deepak Bhargava and USAction Executive Director Jeff Blum said the partnership will begin by focusing on economic justice issues in small handful of targeted states.

Blum explained that the groups will select states where threats to labor and other progressives are front and center because of aggressive, right-wing governors and state legislatures, most of whom are funded by conservative corporations and reactionary billionaires like the Koch brothers.

"Our goal is to build strength -- permanent, progressive, community infrastructure for multi-racial, bottom-up majorities," Blum explained.

We want to demonstrate concrete, measurable results on 2014 and 2016 timetables, with electoral outcomes squarely in mind. We want to bring existing groups together in new ways and add members and activists -- whether in current groups or in new structures that we create.

CCC and USAction see their approach as one in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. USAction, which has 21 state affiliates as part of its federation with a combined staff of about 275 and some 1.5 million online members, works primarily with working and middle-class people, in the suburbs and smaller cities. CCC, which has 78 core partners in 38 states, works more exclusively with low-income people and people of color, and has attracted the notice of the White House, among others, with its ability to mobilize more than one million people to fight for immigration reform.

"Putting these constituencies together can be powerful," CCC's Bhargava explains.

"USAction and CCC share certain key values and approaches that make this partnership possible and our differences make our work complementary in important ways."

Will it work? The Open Society Foundation's Vandenberg, who hosted the national call in which the new partnership was announced, might be in a position to judge best. His organization has funded both organizations and he used to lead a progressive organization in Colorado that was affiliated with both national groups.

"I know CCC and USAction from a variety of perspectives and they both fill vital roles in the movement," Vandenberg says. "Open Society Foundation believes this kind of increased alignment is good news for the progressive sector."

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