

The



# LOWDOWN

Edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer ♦ Vol.12 No.1 ♦ January 2010

**“Next will probably be the Sierra Club, then Planned Parenthood, then the National Council of Churches. It’s an endless list of people of conscience that right-wing Republicans and their allies in the business community and the conservative media want to destroy.”**

—PETER DRIER, Professor of Politics, Occidental College, September 29, 2009

*Time to defund those who’ve really ripped off our government*

## ACORN’s real “crime” is that it empowers the poor

**THE NAME FELIX WALKER** is not one you would recognize, but this 19th-century congressman inadvertently contributed a word to America’s political lexicon that you will recognize—a word that fairly well sums up a lot of what we’re getting these days from right-wing politicians and pundits.

In the 1820s, Walker was the U.S. representative for Buncombe County, North Carolina. In an age of great political orators, Walker was not one. He was a droner, a dull fellow known for expressing his dullness at great length on every topic. No matter what issue was up for debate in the House—no matter whether he had any real knowledge, facts, or insights to add—Walker would rise to speak, insisting that his constituents back home would want his voice heard. He would then launch into a wandering, wearisome, often-nonsensical discourse that he always called “a speech for Buncombe.”

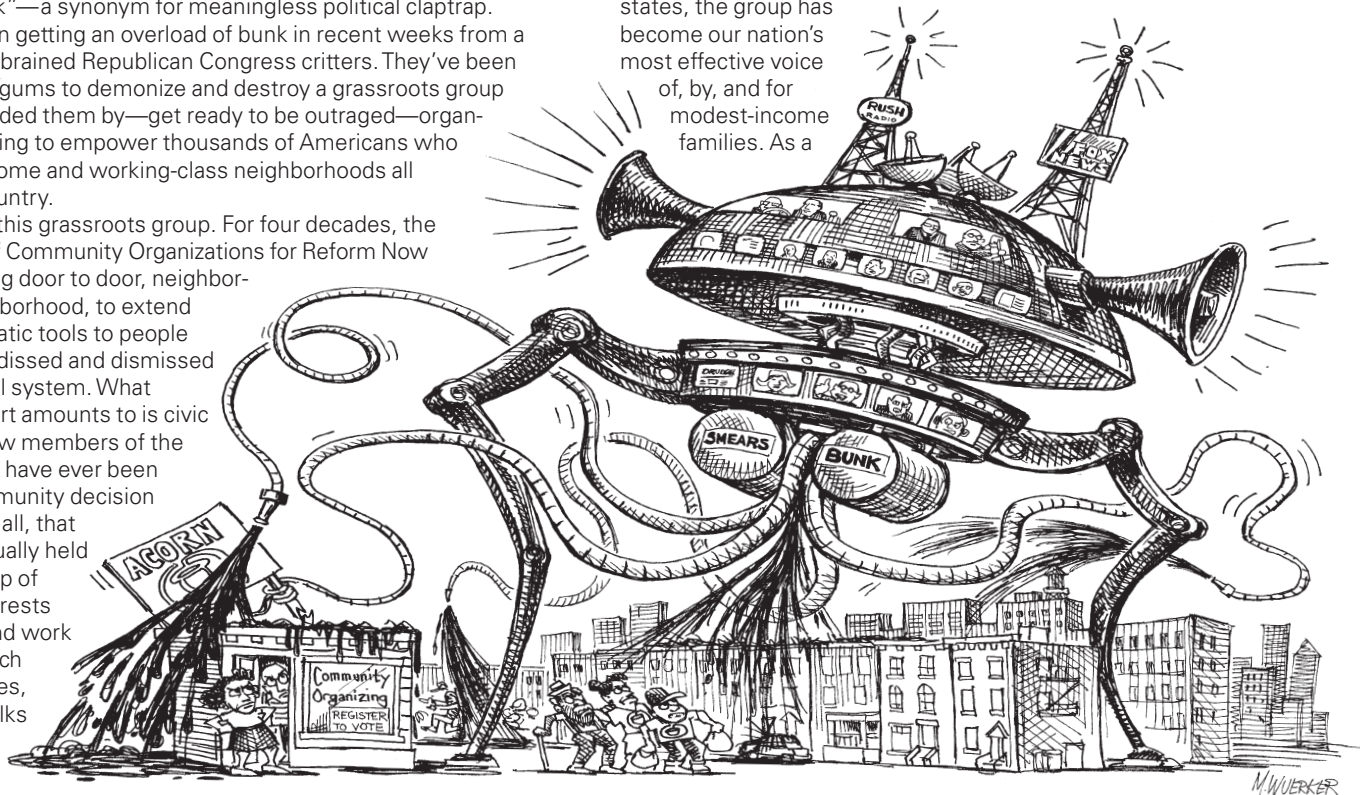
Exasperated colleagues began to refer to Walker’s interminable prattling as “just so much buncombe,” a phrase that has been passed down to us as “bunk”—a synonym for meaningless political claptrap.

We’ve been getting an overload of bunk in recent weeks from a gaggle of Fox-brained Republican Congress critters. They’ve been flapping their gums to demonize and destroy a grassroots group that has offended them by—get ready to be outraged—organizing and helping to empower thousands of Americans who live in low-income and working-class neighborhoods all across the country.

ACORN is this grassroots group. For four decades, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now has been going door to door, neighborhood to neighborhood, to extend basic democratic tools to people who’ve been dissed and dismissed by the political system. What ACORN’s effort amounts to is civic education. Few members of the local chapters have ever been active in community decision making. After all, that process is usually held in the tight grip of moneyed interests who reside and work in distant, much tonier zip codes, and regular folks rarely are welcome.

Through ACORN, however, these powerless ones get an immersion in self-help democracy, learning how to operate in the public sphere to become both political and economic players. They form their own neighborhood organizations, elect officers, and choose a set of issues to push—from bank redlining to better garbage pickup, from rip-off utility bills to enforcement of antipollution regulations. They soon discover that working together, they have actual *power* to get things done through direct actions, group negotiations, and voter participation.

This democratization process is the essence of self-government, and ACORN has been remarkably successful at it. Having organized half a million members into 1,200 neighborhood chapters in 110 cities and 39 states, the group has become our nation’s most effective voice of, by, and for modest-income families. As a



## CREDIT-RATING FINAGLERS FREED

America has the wrong approach for dealing with thieves. Rather than “looking backwards” at their misdeeds and “punishing” them, we merely need to ask that they not misbehave in the future, then monitor their behavior.

Believe it or not, this is how congressional leaders are addressing the thievery of three little-known gangs. This compassionate approach is not meant for common robbers, of course. No, no—lawmakers are happy to punish them to the hilt. Rather, the kid-glove treatment is reserved for thieves named Moody’s, Standard & Poor’s, and Fitch’s—the Big Three credit-rating agencies that exist to evaluate the worthiness of corporate-issued bonds, assigning a grade (from triple-A to “junk”) that helps investors know the risk involved in buying the bonds.

But the Big Three run a rigged game that robs our pension funds and other investors. Moody’s, S&P, and Fitch are not independent public regulators, but for-profit firms that are paid fat fees by the very corporations whose bonds they rate. Yes, this is an inherent conflict of interest! Rating firms profit by putting smiley-faced grades on lousy bonds, thus deceiving (and robbing) the public. For example, the Big Three gave thumbs-up to the sub-prime housing bonds that turned out to be worthless, causing trillions of dollars in losses for the public and crashing our economy.

Yet our Congress critters have declared these finaglers “too big to jail.” Congress is freeing them to continue their corrupt, for-hire, monopolistic system of credit-rating flim-flammery.

The job of grading corporate bonds should be done by a public entity whose sole loyalty is to the public.

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Texas ACORN member put it, “Once you get involved, you will never be satisfied with grumbling again. After getting organized and making change happen, you can never go back to doing nothing.”

### Panic attack

An engaged, organized, educated, and motivated group of low-wage Americans with an agenda of progressive change is not a sight that delights the corporate establishment—especially when the group has proved to be an impressive force in congressional and presidential elections. This is why the money powers have unleashed (and funded) their snarling hounds of right-wing politics to go after ACORN with a blood lust.

It was in 2004 that national GOP political operatives first felt the group’s growing grassroots punch. In the Bush-Kerry presidential run, ACORN members registered and helped turn out hundreds of thousands of voters in their neighborhoods, especially in such hotly contested states as Florida, Michigan, and Ohio. Most of those folks preferred the policies put forth by Kerry and several Democrats who were contending for congressional seats, thus adding substantially to the usual number of Democratic votes.

The reaction from corporate-funded campaign operatives was instantaneous: “Auuuuuuugh,” they cried. In 2006, ACORN’s registration and get-out-the-vote drives brought even more new voters into the process in such states as Minnesota, Missouri, and Ohio, where Democratic congressional candidates were elected. “Double-Auuuuuuugh,” shrieked GOP politicians.

Republican-minded groups—from the NRA to religious rightists—run the exact same kinds of voter-reg and turnout campaigns in GOP neighborhoods. But these rabid partisans (who are the same people who connived in 2000 to “elect” Bush president on a rigged 5-4 Supreme Court vote) were not about to allow a Democratic-minded group get away with such success. So they cynically decided to demonize the group, shout it down, and shut it down.

Their first ploy was to raise the bugaboo of voter fraud, claiming that

a tsunami of ineligible people was casting ballots and stealing elections and that ACORN was behind it. The demonizers knew that there are practically no cases of intentional voter fraud in all of America, much less a single case of any election being stolen by illegal votes. However, Karl Rove and John McCain led the Republican squawk squad, demanding that ACORN be investigated, prosecuted, and executed for conducting a secretive mass campaign to pervert the sanctity of the ballot.

Rove even played a central role in the heavy-handed firings of Bush-appointed U.S. attorneys, removing at least two in part because they had not found any actual electoral fraud by ACORN and would not play politics with the issue.

Meanwhile, McCain went totally goofy in 2008, loudly denouncing ACORN for instances in which a few of its canvassers signed up people who registered more than once or used fake names. But the law plainly says that voter registrars cannot reject any application, no matter how silly. That’s the job of voting officials—and indeed, in the very cases waved around by McCain, ACORN staffers were the ones who flagged the phony signatures for the officials.

Registering to vote is not the same as ultimately voting. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck might sign up, but they are not allowed to show up and cast a ballot. Indeed, there is not one documented case of an improper vote cast because of a problem with a voter-registration form collected by ACORN. The organization committed no fraud.

But the devil creates his own “truth,” and the right-wing screed machine continued to pound its fraudulent voter-fraud line. A corporate-funded front group bought full-page ads in the *New York Times* under the name of “RottenACORN.com,” hyping the lie that the group was involved in a voter registration “scandal.”

Mainstream-news outlets dutifully spread the lie. In an academic analysis of the 2008 coverage that 15 major-media organizations gave to the voter-fraud accusations against ACORN, two university professors found that some 80% of the stories did not mention that ACORN itself had reported the false names—and

72% of the stories failed to quote anyone from the grassroots group to get its side of the story. Previously, ACORN was not a household name, but by election day 2008, a national poll by the Pew Research Center showed that 82% of Americans knew of it and that most of their knowledge came from the right wing’s voter-fraud campaign.

### The sting

Like sugar-fueled kindergartners at a piñata party, congressional Republicans kept swatting wildly at ACORN, hoping to bust it open. Early last year, for example, they claimed that Democratic lawmakers were secretly trying to funnel billions of stimulus dollars to the community-organizing group. Not true, but the media covered it, adding to the group’s negative public image.

Last July, California’s Rep. Darrell Issa used his position as ranking Republican on the government-reform committee to issue a hyperbolic hatchet job on the poor people’s group. You could sense Joe McCarthy grinning from hell at Issa’s devilishly titled report, “Is ACORN Intentionally Structured As A Criminal Enterprise?” It contained a rehash of old, discredited charges—but the media covered it.

Then, last fall, the frenetic right-wing swatters made a direct propaganda hit. Two young ultra-right activists who despised ACORN for its success at turning out people who tend to vote for Democrats produced a gotcha video they had surreptitiously recorded in the organization’s Baltimore office. Posing as a prostitute and her boyfriend, the two sauntered in and asked for help to file taxes, buy a home, and run a brothel out of it.

The hidden-camera video appears to show two ACORN representatives (a part-time staffer and a local member serving as a receptionist) working with the “couple” to skirt the laws. “AHA!” shouted the entire right-wing machine in unison. “See, we told you this outfit is corrupt from top to bottom!” Fox News quickly threw the illicit video (it’s illegal in Maryland to tape people without their knowledge and consent) on the air as PROOF! that ACORN must be busted.

Not so fast, slick. Yes, the unprofessional behavior of the two Baltimore office workers was deplorable and embarrassing, but this organization has 300 full-time employees, 200 part-time workers, and tens of thousands of volunteers doing honorable and important work that benefits millions. Before we hang the whole outfit, let’s consider

## DoSomething!

For more information, check out the following websites:

While the right is trumping up stories about phony voter fraud, true disenfranchisement is happening. To learn more about the real problems with voting in our country, check out these groups:

■ **Brennan Center for Justice**  
[www.brennancenter.org](http://www.brennancenter.org)

■ **Project Vote**  
[www.projectvote.org](http://www.projectvote.org)

■ **Common Cause**  
[www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org)

three little-reported facts about that undercover video:

**1. ONLY SELECTED PIECES OF THE TAPE**

have been shown, and those appear to be heavily edited—there are abrupt breaks in the action, for example, and the words of the prostitute/boyfriend duo have been altered by inserting voiceovers that make it difficult to know the questions to which the ACORN workers are responding. Also, the boyfriend had showed up at the office in the preppy attire of a college student, but in the released video snippets he appears in the garb of a pimp. Neither the videographers nor Fox News have been willing to make the full video available for review by ACORN or the news media.

**2. THIS WAS NOT THE FIRST ATTEMPT**

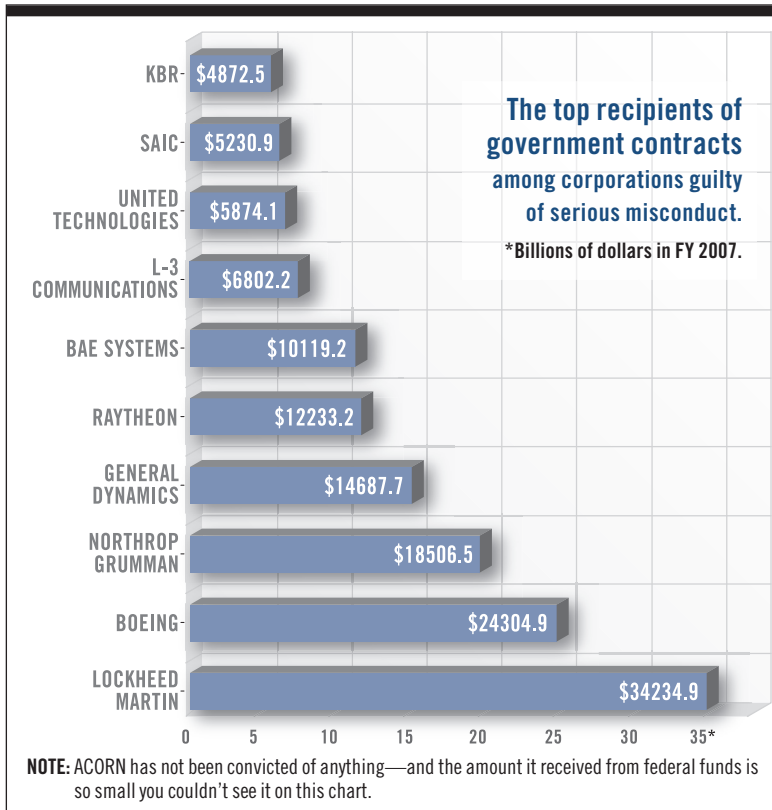
by the two right-wing partisans to find someone, anyone, associated with ACORN who could be egged on to say something wrong. The duo tried their sting in at least seven other ACORN offices in addition to Baltimore, but they couldn't get the video they wanted. In fact, the staff in Philadelphia and San Diego called the cops on them.

**3. WHILE THE TWO BALTIMORE WORKERS PLAYED ALONG**

with the stunt in the interview, no one in any ACORN office prepared or filed any papers or took any action whatsoever to pursue what the poseurs said they wanted. Beyond some comments in the interview, nothing improper happened, much less anything "corrupt" or illegal.

**Congress stampedes**

Still, after the right wing's long campaign of ACORN demonization, this flimsy video "evidence" was enough to spook most Democrats in Congress, as well as the few sane Republicans still there and the skit-tish Obama White House. Not only



were they afraid to stand up for this essential group of grassroots organizers, but they joined the right-wing stampede to get ACORN. The ultimate assault came in a piece of legislative nastiness called the "Defund ACORN Act," authored by Rep. Nasty himself, Darrell Issa.

About 10% of ACORN's budget comes from federal grants to work on everything from housing to health issues in low-income neighborhoods. ACORN gets widespread applause for spending this money efficiently and effectively, but now it was to be stripped away by vindictive right wingers and cowering Democrats.

The anti-ACORNers howled that felonious organizations should not get a penny of taxpayers' money, and both houses of Congress over-

whelmingly passed defunding bills in September. In the House, not one Republican voted for the antipoverty group. No surprise there. But 172 Democrats also abandoned ACORN (to see the list of 75 forthright Dems who did stand tall, go to our website: [hightowerlowdown.org](http://hightowerlowdown.org)).

But that was not the end of it, for there were two huge hiccups at the core of Issa's bill. First, it is blatantly unconstitutional. In Article One, Congress is specifically prohibited from passing a "bill of attainder," which is a law singling out any one group for retribution. It is the judicial branch, not Congress, which deals with the punishment of misdeeds, and our courts require a trial to convict anyone. In ACORN's case, there has never even been a judicial investi-

**WEASELS UNDERMINE ETHICS REFORM**

The word "weasels" describes not only furry, burrowing rodents, but also corporate lobbyists who tunnel loopholes through our country's ethics laws.

Take Doheny Global, an energy and real-estate corporation. Last year, it hosted a week-long schmoozefest for potential investors, inviting them to hobnob in Israel with "an elite cadre" of power brokers, including such members of Congress as Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Florida Republican. Participants had to pay \$18,500 each to be part of Doheny's confab—but the corporation covered the tab for Congress critters and their spouses.

Wait—didn't Congress "reform the system" by prohibiting corporate lobbyists from paying for congressional travel? Well, yes. Lobbyists can no longer pay for the travel, gala parties, and other bennies that lawmakers are given on these junkets—but a loophole allows lobbyists' corporate clients to foot the bill.

For instance, the Congressional Black Caucus held a conference last year in a Gulf Coast casino. The health-care workshop was sponsored by Eli Lilly, the session on climate change was funded by electric utilities, and Wal-Mart sponsored a clinic on—get this—skeet shooting!

Since the caucus' events were organized by a lobbyist, the corporations were not allowed to fund them directly. Instead, they gave to a non-profit outfit set up by the caucus, and it pays for the events. Caucus members had to pay for their travel, but they could buy tickets using campaign funds, including money donated by the corporations.

That's what happens to reform when weasels do their job on it.

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## THE RICH WORRY ABOUT YOU

You'll be comforted to know that the rich are concerned about you. Not concerned about your joblessness, lack of health care, or your economic condition. No—it's your psychological state of mind that has them worried. They are troubled by what you think about them. With the rich, you see, it's always about them.

They sense a disquieting mood among the hoi polloi—an anger at what Wall Street has done, a feeling that the rich are greedy and get unfair advantages. To think such thoughts, they say, is unhealthy for you emotionally. After all, says a wealth-management advisor for high-dollar bankers, "To revile the rich is to revile the American dream." Instead, you should view the rich as your role models.

Your negative vibe is upsetting the extremely well off. "They feel mischaracterized," says a Merrill Lynch wealth manager. Many give to charity, and soon, as the Merrill Lynch advisor put it, "to be characterized as not doing their fair share begins to wear on them." See, you've made them sad.

So lighten up on the rich. Otherwise, explains a financial psychologist, we'll create "a generation that distrusts investing and associates wealth with greed." Oh? And how irrational is that? Furthermore, says the financial shrink, young people "have watched their parents lose their money, and now they think, 'you can't trust banks.' We need to do work around that."

Keep the psychiatrist's couch for the wealthy elites who've made a mess of our economy and now want to feel better about themselves by blaming us for being a wee bit angry at their narcissism.

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gation of purported misdeeds, much less a trial. The organization has not been convicted of anything.

Luckily, the legal system seems to be setting things right. ACORN sued the House for its unconstitutional penalty—and won! Last month, Nina Gershon, a federal district judge in New York, ruled that Issa's punitive legislation amounts to a bill of attainder, and she issued a preliminary injunction nullifying the defunding law. We'll soon see if Obama's Justice Department appeals her ruling.

The second hickey is even more glaring. And fun! It hoists right-wingers on their own corporate petards. When passing the Defund ACORN Act, proponents asserted that while it focused on the poor people's group, Congress intended a broad implementation that would cut off federal funding for "any organization" that has been charged by authorities with breaking federal election laws, lobbying-disclosure laws, or campaign-finance laws, or with filing fraudulent paperwork with any federal agency.

Hello! ACORN has not been so charged, but guess who has? A who's who of fat-cat war contractors, that's who!

On the day he voted to defund the little community group, Nebraska Sen. Mike Johanns sanctimoniously declared, "Somebody has to go after ACORN." How courageous, senator, but what about the big criminals?

Jeremy Scahill, the excellent investigative reporter, notes that Blackwater (such a notoriously bad corporate player that it has recently changed its name and ousted its CEO to try to buff up its image) has taken more than \$1 billion in federal contracts and continues to receive more contracts despite being charged with fraud, tax evasion, arms smuggling, and manslaughter. Just one of Blackwater's contracts that is now

under investigation totals \$55 million. That is *\$2 million more than the total federal dollars allotted to ACORN in the past 15 years.*

Check out the chart on page 3 and contrast the 10 largest corporate scofflaws with even the wildest claims of abuses by tiny ACORN.

Who's the "somebody" willing to "go after" these truly big-time miscreants? Amazingly, we have just such a person: Senator Bernie Sanders. Amazingly, this smart, gutsy, tenacious senator from Vermont (one of only seven solons who stood up to the defund-ACORN mob in the Senate) recently shamed a majority of his colleagues into at least documenting the hypocrisy. He pointed out that the three biggest Pentagon contractors (Lockheed, Boeing, and Northrup) have engaged in 109 criminal violations since 1995, paying nearly \$3 billion in fines and settlements. Yet these three recidivist corporations were rewarded with another \$77 billion from the Pentagon in 2007.

On October 1, the Senate passed Sanders' amendment requiring the Secretary of Defense to publish an annual tally of the money it doles out to corporations that have been convicted of or have confessed to defrauding taxpayers. It also requires the Pentagon to recommend penalties for the corporations that keep cheating us. The Sanders provision now goes to the House and, if okayed there, to Obama.

### Targeting all of us

Democrats and all of us in the larger progressive movement need to get our heads screwed on right. Too few have risen to defend ACORN, much less aggressively oppose this orchestrated and relentless attack by self-serving right-wing political opportunists (kudos to those who have stood up, including the AFL-CIO,

Alliance for Justice, Campaign for America's Future, Center for Constitutional Rights, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Media Matters, NAACP, and USAction).

ACORN itself admits that it has had management weaknesses and damaging failures of internal governance. It's a sprawling, decentralized community organization, but its leaders are working doubly hard to implement reforms and to right what's wrong. But what's worse than organizational flaws is for allies (many of whom benefit directly from the astounding array of good work done by this volunteer network of mostly poor people) to abandon ACORN when it needs us most.

How can we claim to be part of a real movement devoted to egalitarian values if organizational leaders, funders, and others run for cover at the first flash of lightning? Do we not understand that we really are connected and that the right-wing and corporate forces trying to stomp ACORN won't stop there? If you doubt their destructive intentions, consider this September 26, 2009, exchange between Rep. Steve King, the kooky rightist from Iowa, and an interviewer with the far-right *Washington Independent*:

**INTERVIEWER:** What is the next natural target to defund the left? If the ACORN thing is successful, [as] it looks like it is?

**KING:** Well...SEIU (Service Employees International Union) is another one.

King goes on to say that the right wing's political path will be made a lot easier "if those two can be pulled down and out of this society."

Yoo-hoo. Pay attention. The corporate interests and their political enablers are not just after ACORN—they're after you and me.

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### ACORN'S REAL "CRIME" IS THAT THEY EMPOWER THE POOR

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