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President, ACORN

**Take Back America Conference
Campaign for America's Future / Institute for America's Future**

Plenary Session: Shrubbed: The Radical Project of George Bush

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George W. Shrub has pushed so many right-wing proposals through Congress than many progressives have begun to despair.

But the low- and moderate-income families that have been hit hardest can't afford to despair. We don't have time. We're fighting for our jobs, our income, our homes, and our utilities. We're fighting to get our children a good education.

Bush has got a lot of people scared. Fear has become a civic virtue. Dick Cheney's dug a cave under his house, and progressives have stopped risking disappointment by hoping for radical change.

Those at the bottom of the economic ladder don't have time to be afraid to hope. We've been badly shrubbed, but we've heightened our resolve. We're using nonviolent civil disobedience to shake up the system. Many of us don't feel we have a lot left to lose.

ACORN members have lost their jobs, seen their wages cut, had their homes stolen by predatory lenders, lost medicine to Medicaid cuts, and had their heat shut off in the winter.

The latest giant tax cut, which everyone in the Fair Taxes for All coalition fought against so well, doesn't just mean a losing mark on a scoreboard. It means hunger, sickness, and homelessness.

We did win some crumbs for the states, but the states were already in ruins. Jobs are being slashed as the result of policies that Bush says are meant to create jobs. And that includes my job.

The presidency of ACORN is an elected and unpaid position. I work as a substance-abuse prevention specialist. I help prevent addiction to tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. The need for this kind of work is intense.

Most of my work is funded through the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, which is undergoing massive budget cuts. In my department, 23 of 30

people were laid off early this year. My work was cut back to four days per week, eliminating 20 percent of my income.

Bush's endless demands for tax cuts for millionaires are so willfully blind that he reminds me of a substance abuser. If my job is eliminated, maybe I'll be able to find work training economists in how to speak to tax-cut addicts.

As some of you know, the administration is quietly proposing to use a back door to raise taxes on many working poor families. The IRS wants to put in place new requirements for many families who earn the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), requirements that will prove impossible for many honest tax payers, and requirements that could never be imposed on middle class or wealthy tax payers without causing the biggest political uproar since the Boston Tea Party.

Aside from the minimum wage (which Congress allows to lose value every year) and the 40 hour week (which is also under attack from the White House), the EITC is probably our country's most effective program to lift working families out of poverty.

The EITC puts about \$2,000, on average, into the hands of working poor families with children. This constitutes a significant boost in income for a family earning, say, \$15,000 or \$20,000.

The IRS proposal will ask people to prove they are related to their children and that their children live with them, and will require forms of proof for this that will in many cases be impossible to produce.

As most of you know, Congress scrapped an increase in the refundable child tax credit that had been included in the latest tax cut bill. ACORN's grassroots organizing was part of what won that refundable credit two years ago, and we are organizing now to promote a bill that would reinstate the increase.

I could go on and on -- until Mr. Ashcroft shows up -- talking about Bush's attack on the poor. You don't want to get me started on the Most Children Left Behind Act.

But let me instead tell you one quick story of how we can sometimes win. It may suggest ideas to you for how we can Bushwhack our way out of this mess.

January 6, 2003, was a cold day in Chicago, well below freezing. The following day George W. Bush was expected in town to announce his new plan for tax cuts for millionaires.

Unfortunately for Shrub, the television and radio news on the evening of the 6th in Chicago was dominated by the story that he was letting people freeze to death. On that day, 50 ACORN members, many of them lacking heat at home, brought

blankets and "moved in" at the Illinois Republican Party headquarters. They demanded that Bush release emergency money for energy assistance.

Three elderly women were arrested, but at least the jail had heat.

On January 9, another 15 ACORN chapters around the country protested Bush's policy by taking over Republican Party offices and demanding that officials send a fax to the White House and the Capitol. The fax urged Bush and Congress to heed ACORN's demands for funding of LIHEAP. LIHEAP stands for Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

New Orleans ACORN persuaded Senator John Breaux to speak personally with the President and urge him to release the funds. On January 20, ACORN members in Cleveland took over the offices of the Republican Party and persuaded the staff to fax the White House.

During this campaign, families without heat received donations after appearing in the media. But the major victory came on January 24 when Bush released \$200 million in emergency funding.

The action came too late for some. Three Philadelphia seniors died freezing in their apartments over that weekend.

The next victory came in Congress, which passed \$1.8 billion for LIHEAP. The amount was an increase over the previous year, and it was all in regular funds, not emergency funds. That means Bush can't block it.

ACORN and others have already begun pushing for Fiscal Year 2004 LIHEAP funding of \$3.4 billion.

Our goal is three-fold:

First, to win that money and keep people from freezing to death.

Second, to organize communities and empower them with a successful campaign.

And third, to produce more media coverage of Shrub's amazing cruelty.

The LIHEAP victory, like the few others we've had in Washington under Bush, involved grassroots organizing, civil disobedience that made comfortable people uncomfortable, and taking our opponents by surprise.

At the state and city levels, ACORN has been moving forward with a more progressive agenda, while holding off federal attempts to overturn state victories and state attempts to ban progressive local laws.

Illinois ACORN members last week won a minimum wage law for their state by protesting in the Capitol until the Speaker finally called the bill up for a vote.

ACORN and allies in New York City and State recently passed an increase in income tax rates on the very wealthiest New Yorkers in order to pay for schools, something that ACORN and allies have begun pushing for in New Jersey.

ACORN chapters around the country have passed living wage laws and laws restricting predatory lending, and we have thus far blocked a bill in Congress that would tear up all state laws on predatory lending.

With enough organizing, these sorts of victories are possible now for the first time in a generation.

If, for the first time in a generation, we can begin pushing this sort of positive proposal at the national level, we may not win it right away, but we will be able to drag the middle ground back to the middle.

We may even give more people the idea that they should bother to vote. And that can mean only one thing: 592 days left before the post-Shrub era.

Before we cheer for that, we should start organizing with a goal of forcing the next president, a Democratic president, to enact a progressive agenda. We should keep constantly in mind that there are many more nonvoters than swing voters, and that organizing nonvoters to both vote and become active is our only chance.

That's why we're considering putting a minimum wage on the ballot in Florida in November of 2004, and using it to turn out voters who will send George W. packing. Congress has allowed the federal minimum wage to lose a third of its value, despite the fact that over 80 percent of Americans consistently support restoring value. With our win in Illinois last week, there are now 12 states plus the District of Columbia and the City of Santa Fe that have minimum wage laws covering all private employers with a wage level higher than the federal level. Florida could become state number 13. And the vast majority of the voters who will eagerly turn out to vote themselves a raise can be expected to also vote for a presidential candidate who supports the minimum wage.

Now is the time to build the power we need to elect a progressive president and to keep that president progressive once they're in office.

Thank you.