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CORPORATE REFORM DISCUSSION GROUPS

Corporations have brought many benefits to modern society, including technological innovation, important products and services, and high-paying jobs that have created a decent standard of living for hundreds of millions of people. Nevertheless, the vast majority of people believe that corporations have too much power. For example, 72% of those polled by Business Week in September 2000 agreed that, "Business has gained too much power over too many aspects of American life¹." And this was before many of us had even heard of Enron.

Today we are facing an astounding array of problems, many of which are rooted in the abusive behavior and unchallenged power of giant multinational corporations. The economy does not sufficiently support working people (thirty percent of American working people earn poverty level wages²), the ecosystems that make life on earth possible are gravely endangered (the extinction rate is estimated by leading scientists to be between 1,000 and 10,000 times greater than the natural rate³), industrial polluters threaten our health (according to their own data, U.S. industries released over 7 billion pounds of toxic emissions in 2000 alone, or over 20 pounds per person living in the U.S.⁴), and the gap between the rich and the poor continues to expand (the richest one percent of Americans receive as much after-tax income as the bottom thirty-eight percent combined⁵).

Corporations dominate virtually every sector of the economy and nearly all of society. Their influence is felt everywhere, including our schools and universities⁶, religious institutions⁷, entertainment outlets⁸, the halls of government⁹ and other public spaces¹⁰, and virtually every other area of our lives¹¹. They determine the news we read (and sometimes don't)¹², the conditions of our working environment¹³, our health care options¹⁴, the quality of the food we eat¹⁵, the safety of our drinking water¹⁶ and air, and the sustainability of the planet's ecosystems¹⁷.

This discussion group is for those people who believe that corporations have too much power and who want to learn more about the roots of the problems and ways we can move toward solutions.

History teaches us that the power of an informed and organized citizenry can be vast and formidable, and the first step toward building that powerful citizenry is to educate ourselves and our communities. All around the world, for centuries, groups of dedicated citizens have proven that by educating themselves and organizing, people can have strength in numbers and that our voices together can be louder than that of the richest corporation or the most powerful government. In the last century in the United States alone, citizens have asserted their constitutional rights in successful fights for unions, racial desegregation, women's right to vote, young people's right to vote, and international peace.¹⁸

The struggle between those who have power and those who have little is timeless. In today's world there are two distinct types of power, people and money. Our movements tend not to have much money but generally represent the interests of the majority of people. The challenge facing us today

Citizen Works Corporate Power Discussion Group is to find ways to utilize our rights and powers as citizens, along with a little bit of money, to counterbalance the dominance of giant corporations. You don't have to be Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. to be an activist who creates lasting change, but you do need to be dedicated, persistent and willing to stand up for what you think is right.

Citizen Works' discussion group program is designed as a three part series to launch longer-term discussion and sustainable action groups. The first set of readings will give you an overview of the basic problems of corporate power, as well as begin to highlight some approaches to reform. The second set offers a deeper analysis of how corporations gained so much power and explores in more detail some of the major problems. The third set presents concrete reform options and some inspiring thoughts on building a strong citizen movement. Beyond these readings, we suggest turning to the Citizen Works recommended reading list (attached), for a list of titles on corporate power issues. We hope you will share this knowledge with others and find ways to challenge unaccountable corporate power in your community. Citizen Works offers organizing guides and resources to support your efforts.

¹ *Too Much Corporate Power?*, Business Week, September 11, 2000

² <http://www.house.gov/bernie/statements/2000-04-13-gsdr.html>

³ http://www.iucn.org/info_and_news/press/species2000.html

⁴ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2000 Toxics Release Inventory, May 2002

⁵ Labor Party Press, http://lpa.igc.org/lpv46/lpp46_wto_roundup.html

⁶ See *Campus, Inc.: Corporate Power in the Ivory Tower*, Geoffrey White and Flannery Hauck; *The Knowledge Factory*, Kate Gillett; *Higher Ed, Inc.*, Richard Ruch

⁷ See *Christianity, Incorporated: How Big Business is Buying the Church*, Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow

⁸ See Adbusters, www.adbusters.org; Commercial Alert, www.commercialalert.org

⁹ See *Who Will Tell The People*, William Grieder; *Washington on \$10 Million a Day: How Lobbyists Plunder the Nation*, Ken Silverstein, and *Selling Out: How Big Corporate Money Buys Elections, Rams Through Legislation, and Betrays Our Democracy*, Mark Green

¹⁰ See *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth*, David Bollier

¹¹ See *Corporation Nation: How Corporations Are Taking Over Our Lives and What We Can Do About It*, Charles Derber

¹² See *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky; *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, Robert McChesney

¹³ See <http://multinationalmonitor.org/mm2000/00november/toc.html>, <http://www.hazards.org/>

¹⁴ See *Making a Killing: HMO's and the Threat to Our Health*, Jamie Court; *Bleeding the Patient: The Consequences of Corporate Health Care*, David Himmelstein MD, et al

¹⁵ See *Genetically Engineered Food: Changing the Nature of Nature*, Martin Teitel and Kimberly Wilson; www.foodfirst.org, www.organicconsumer.org; <http://multinationalmonitor.org/mm2000/mm0001.00.html>

¹⁶ See *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water*, Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke

¹⁷ See www.worldwatch.org; www.rachel.org for specific environmental facts and analysis.

¹⁸ See *Poor People's Movements*, Frances Fox Piven; *The Populist Moment*, Lawrence Goodwyn; *Parting the Waters*, Taylor Branch; *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn; *State of the Union*, Nelson Lichtenstein. For other suggestions see www.citizenworks.org/actions/readinglist.php#amhist.