

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

OPINION | MAY 9, 2009

More Acorn Voter Fraud Comes to Light

Congressional Democrats still want the group to be eligible for federal money.

By JOHN FUND

Democrats are split on how to deal with Acorn, the liberal "community organizing" group that deployed thousands of get-out-the-vote workers last election. State and city Democratic officials -- who've been contending with its many scandals -- are moving against it. Washington Democrats are still sweeping Acorn abuses under a rug.

On Monday, Nevada officials charged Acorn, its regional director and its Las Vegas field director with submitting thousands of fraudulent voter registration forms last year. Larry Lomax, the registrar of voters in Las Vegas, says he believes 48% of Acorn's forms "are clearly fraudulent." On Thursday, prosecutors in Pittsburgh, Pa., also charged seven Acorn employees with filing hundreds of fraudulent voter registrations before last year's general election.

Acorn spokesman Scott Levenson calls the Nevada criminal complaint "political grandstanding" and says that any problems were the actions of an unnamed "bad employee." But Catherine Cortez Masto, Nevada's Democratic Attorney General, told the Las Vegas Sun that Acorn itself is named in the criminal complaint. She says that Acorn's training manuals "clearly detail, condone and . . . require illegal acts," such as requiring its workers to meet strict voter-registration targets to keep their jobs.

Other Democrats on the ground have complaints. Fred Voight, deputy election commissioner in Philadelphia, protested after Acorn (according to the registrar of voters and his own investigation) submitted at least 1,500 fraudulent registrations last fall. "This has been going on for a number of years," he told CNN in October. St. Louis Democrat Matthew Potter, the city's deputy elections director, had similar complaints.

Elsewhere, Washington state prosecutors fined Acorn \$25,000 after several employees were convicted of voter registration fraud in 2007. The group signed a consent decree with King County (Seattle), requiring it to beef up its oversight or face criminal prosecution. In the 2008 election, Acorn's practices led to investigations, some ongoing, in 14 other states.

The stink is bad enough that some congressional Democrats have taken notice. At a March 19 hearing on election problems, Michigan Rep. John Conyers, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, pressed New York Rep. Gerald Nadler, chairman of the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, to hold a hearing on Acorn. He called the charges against it "serious." Mr. Nadler agreed to consider the request.

Mr. Nadler's office now says there will be no hearing on Acorn because Mr. Conyers has changed his mind. Mr. Conyers's office released a statement on Monday saying that after reviewing "the complaints against Acorn, I have concluded that a hearing on this matter appears unwarranted at this time." A Democratic staffer told me he believes the House leadership put pressure on Mr. Conyers to back down. Mr. Conyers's office says it is "unaware" of any contacts with House leaders.

Then there's Barney Frank, the chairman of the House Financial Services Committee. Last month, he voted for a committee amendment (to the Mortgage Reform and Anti-Predatory Lending Act) by Rep. Michelle Bachmann

(R., Minn.) to block groups indicted for voter fraud from receiving federal housing or legal assistance grants. Identical language was passed into law in the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008. Mr. Frank now says he "had not read [the amendment] carefully" before backing it. He gutted the amendment on Thursday, claiming that the language Congress passed just last year is "a violation of the basic principles of due process."

A lot of money is at stake. In the stimulus bill passed by Congress, Acorn is eligible -- along with other activist groups -- to apply for \$2 billion in funds to redevelop abandoned and foreclosed homes. Meanwhile, public records show that last spring the IRS filed three tax liens totaling almost \$1 million against Acorn, most of which concerned employee withholding.

All of this infuriates Marcel Reid, who, along with seven other national Acorn board members, was removed last year after demanding an audit of the group's books. "Acorn has been hijacked by a power-hungry clique that has its own political and personal agendas," she told me. "We are fighting to take back the group."

Bertha Lewis, the head of Acorn, told me last year before their ouster that the "Acorn Eight" were "obsessed" and "confused." But Anita MonCrief, an Acorn whistleblower, says the problems run deep. Ms. MonCrief worked at Project Vote, an Acorn affiliate, in late 2007. She says its development director, Karen Gillette, told her she had direct contact with the Obama campaign and also told her to call Obama donors who had maxed out on donations to the candidate but who could contribute to Acorn. Project Vote calls her charges "absolutely false." (Ms. Gillette has declined comment.)

Acorn's relationship to the Obama campaign is a matter of public record. Last year, Citizens Consulting Inc., the umbrella group controlling Acorn, was paid \$832,000 by the Obama campaign for get-out-the-vote efforts in key primary states. In filings with the Federal Election Commission, the campaign listed the payments as "staging, sound, lighting," only correcting them after reporters from the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review revealed their true nature.

Mr. Obama distanced himself from the group's scandals last year, saying "We don't need Acorn's help." Nevertheless, he got his start as a community organizer at Acorn's side. In 1992, he headed a registration effort for Project Vote, an Acorn partner at the time. In 1995, he represented Acorn in a key case upholding the new Motor Voter Act -- the very law whose mandated postcard registration system Acorn workers use to flood election offices with bogus registrations.

But Acorn's registration tricks may soon be unnecessary. Congressional Democrats are backing a bill to mandate a nationwide data base to automatically register driver's license holders or recipients of government benefits.

This "would create an engraved invitation for voter fraud," says Hans von Spakovsky, a former Federal Election Commission member, who points out that these lists are filled with felons and noncitizens who are ineligible to vote. Ironically, in light of its troubles with the law, Acorn was selected in March to assist the U.S. Census in reaching out to minority communities and recruiting census enumerators for the count next year.

As for the Nevada indictment, Acorn isn't worried. "We've had bad publicity before, and all it does is inform the community that we're here working for the community," Bonnie Greathouse, Acorn's head organizer in Nevada, assured the Las Vegas Review-Journal this week. "People always come forward to our defense. We're just community organizers, just like the president used to be."

Mr. Fund is a columnist for WSJ.com .

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A15

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