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How do we unite our members and our movement?

Across the rift

by Jeff Foy

If there is any ground on which all progressive groups and activists should be able to stand united, it is before the sign that reads 'all of us under assault by the resurgent right must come together to resist those attacks, and work as one to retake the terms of debate and the offices of power.'

Unfortunately, the range of groups under attack from the right is broad, and the issues they are dealing with span the political and social spectrum. Consequently, achieving unity on the left remains the greatest challenge currently facing progressive leaders, activists and organizers.

After all, what does a ship builder in Bremerton have in common with an environmental activist in the forests of Western Oregon? What do seasonal farmworkers in the orchards around Yakima share with the

change-cage crew at a Las Vegas casino? A gay and lesbian group in Boise with a needle exchange program in Spokane?

The answer is, of course, a common problem. And often a common opponent. But the points of unity between, for example, a labor union and an environmental group may not be immediately obvious; and conservative interests have become adept at identifying fault lines and driving wedges between potential allies. Even within a particular group or movement, issues may surface — or be exploited — that have the potential to splinter an organization and blunt its effectiveness.

Driving the wedge

Divide and conquer is a strategy as old as conflict itself, and the right has reached into a time-honored toolbox to come up with the

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equipment that enables it to keep possible opponents battling amongst themselves. This approach might be called, “let’s you and them fight.”

Driving a wedge into a group can be as easy as exploiting a volatile issue that members have yet to consider and over which they are likely to be divided. Organizations that focus tightly on one issue can be vulnerable to a confrontation over where they stand on other issues like immigration or gay and lesbian rights.

Jen Ray is executive director of the Idaho Women’s Network, a statewide coalition of individuals and organizations that works with issues ranging from domestic violence and reproductive rights to welfare reform. It is her belief that progressive organizations, by their very nature, often tread explosive turf, and that they need to find a way to talk about difficult issues before they become destructive wedges.



Photo credit: IWN

hard — things like racism and sexism and classism and homophobia. What’s destructive is when we don’t talk about it, then it works as a wedge issue against us, because we’re unprepared.”

Taking action

The Idaho Women’s Network is one of several groups working with the Western States Center on a project designed to help groups defuse potentially explosive issues. The program, called Action Education, was developed by the Applied Research Center in Oakland (ARC). With support from ARC,

staff from Western States and partner organizations design interactive training curricula aimed at tackling a difficult issue over the course of a two-day workshop. In the case of the Idaho Women’s Network (IWN), the issue was welfare reform.

“Although we work hard to diversify our membership, it is still primarily middle-income white women,” says Ray. “Because so much of the rhetoric around welfare reform was built upon negative stereotypes of low-income women and women of color, welfare reform has been a wedge keeping middle-income women from recognizing the links between their issues and low-income women’s issues. They are in fact very similar, and the attacks on welfare reform have had a tremendous impact on all women’s issues, from domestic violence to child care.”

Because issues of race and class are so commonly employed by the right as divisive tools, ARC encourages each organization that employs Action Education to examine how those factors play into their particular concerns. “Often groups are vulnerable to wedges because they haven’t addressed the systemic barriers within our society or within their own organizations,” says ARC’s Terry Keleher. “If they’re not aware of how racism manifests itself, and they’re not having that conversation, they’re going to be vulnerable to anything racist that is thrown at them.”

The IWN curriculum, entitled “Pregnant Teens and Welfare Queens: America’s War on Welfare and Women’s Equality,” includes activities designed to help participants get in touch with their own attitudes about poverty and welfare. Individuals share their earliest experiences with issues of class, and small groups try to develop monthly expense budgets based on meager welfare and “workfare” incomes. Members examine media portrayals of women on welfare, and ways in which those portrayals have been exploited by political leaders. Other segments of the curriculum involve working on a poetic vision of justice for women, and uncovering the hidden history of women who have brought about change for social justice in this country. The session closes with members working on coming up with solutions to the problem of inadequate income for women.

“Many of the issues we see are difficult to deal with, and I think that is the case for most social justice organizations,” she says. “Because we’re pushing the envelope and challenging the status quo, I think it is critical that we talk about what’s

In Ray's opinion the workshop was very effective, defining the links and defusing the misconceptions that exist between women in different situations. "It was extremely successful," she says. "We had over 25 women from across the state who serve in various leadership roles in our coalition that participated — from board members to organizational leaders to key volunteers. To a person they were very moved by the training, and felt it brought about a different consciousness about the issue."

The new consciousness Ray describes is leading the Women's Network to involve more low-income women within the organization. Says Ray, "Our drive was to make sure that this curriculum was developed before our impending five-year strategic planning process, so that our leadership was prepared to build commitment to low-income women into our strategic plan."

This is the action component of Action Education. In the process of wrangling with volatile issues, groups examine and articulate their core beliefs. The process can leave members with a better sense of who they are and where they stand — strengthening organizational unity and building the strength to take on new challenges as well as stand firm against new attacks.

Reaching across a rift

Headwaters, a forest and watershed group based in Southern Oregon, is using Action Education to span the chasm created by a wedge already driven deep into the politics and landscape of the West. Conservative and corporate interests have successfully pitted labor and environmental activists against one another, arguing that job creation and environment protection are incompatible objectives.

Developed jointly with Western States Center, Headwaters' training brings together participants from labor, environmental and social justice groups and explores the divisions, real and imagined, driving them apart. The curriculum includes sessions in which participants explore common values and develop a hypothetical campaign to advance both job creation and environmental protection. The workshop also addresses the threat posed to all participants by growing corporate

power, and the way corporations weaken their opposition by encouraging conflict between workers and environmentalists.

Headwaters hopes to use the workshop to build a regional base of labor, environmental and social justice leaders committed to a labor/environmental alliance on jobs and the environment. Already, the group is using the skills they have gained through the Action Education program to tackle other wedge issues.

"Recently, we had an educational session with our board and staff members around the question of immigration and the environment," says Headwaters' Kendra Schmiedeskamp (*see page 10*). "That came directly out of our experience with Action Education. It gives us a tool we can use to begin to talk about issues that may be a little bit out of our purview, and might be divisive."

Both the Idaho Women's Network and Headwaters plan to continue using the Action Education model. "We have received very good feedback from both the people who were at the jobs and labor workshop; and the board and staff members who went through our immigration workshop," says Rick Gwynallen, Headwaters' chief administrator. "We feel like we're ending 1997 with the skills to put together a program around Action Education where we can use it in multiple situations."

Jen Ray of IWN emphasizes that "tackling something like classism is an ongoing struggle. Our workshop was a constructive step toward raising the issue. We now have to follow up." Her group plans to apply Action Education techniques to future issue campaigns.

Creating unifying themes

ARC designed the Action Education curriculum as more than just an inoculation against wedges. A major goal of the program is to help members of a group analyze how the issues that concern them are affected by systemic racism, classism and sexism. In addition, using the model can be a way for a group to identify, and unify around, their core values and beliefs. And a group that is unified, educated and clear of vision is better prepared to work in coalition with other activists and movements struggling against similar problems and opponents. ■

