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Build a Democracy Movement

Larry Cohen February 13, 2013 | This article appeared in the March 4, 2013 edition of *The Nation*.

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Working Americans cannot find a way forward through our current political structures and organizations. The US Chamber of Commerce and its front groups may have fared poorly in the November elections, but their forty-year plan to gain control of our economic and political life has been successful. As Occupiers shouted, “We are the 99 percent.” But the 1 percent continue to gain in every imaginable way.

About the Author

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Larry Cohen is the president of the Communications Workers of America.

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Steve Early and Larry Cohen

fixes, campaign finance reform, and a much more fundamental reform of healthcare than would ever have passed the upper chamber.

“Money out, voting in,” including universal voter registration, must become a critical focus of our work. The November 2012 federal election cost approximately \$7 billion, yet only an estimated 70 percent of citizens were registered to vote, and since 2010, thirty states have introduced legislation that would make voting more difficult.

This is not what democracy looks like! Yet too many of us, particularly in labor, will continue to work politically as before. We will continue to find new issues to distract us while our bargaining and organizing rights—already the weakest of any democracy—continue to decline.

Instead, we must not only work for a twenty-first-century democracy, but also build political organizations at the state

Union members need to organize, at work and in our communities, into new progressive organizations that link our issues to American democracy. For the Communications Workers of America (CWA), and for most working women and men, the issues have been clear for years: secure, sustainable jobs; healthcare for all; retirement security; and bargaining and organizing rights. But what is now equally clear is that our democracy does not provide a path to address these issues. The high-water mark of possible electoral success occurred in 2008, and we failed to move forward with federal legislation in any meaningful way.

On December 10 of last year, International Human Rights Day, about fifty groups assembled as the Democracy Initiative, agreeing to work together on the reform of Senate rules, money in politics and voting rights. The NAACP, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace and the CWA convened the coalition, but what was impressive was the range of groups committed to major democratic reforms. We all realized that whether our cause is labor or green, civil rights or women, social justice or good government, working together in new ways—and for the long term—is critical to making progress on our members' fundamental issues.

Nancy Pelosi's House of Representatives in the 111th Congress took up more than 400 items that were never debated for one minute in the Senate, including climate change, bargaining and organizing rights, a slew of income inequality and infrastructure

and federal levels that link economic justice to democracy, reversing the rising income inequality that leads to economic stagnation. We need a caucus inside the Democratic Party that exposes the role of big money and holds elected officials accountable to our issues, including launching primary challenges at every level. Working Americans, whether union members or not, will only find justice on the job as part of this new movement.

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