



Protests Greet Lawmakers, Corporate Officials Gathering in Dallas as New Arm of ALEC Is Announced

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Two grassroots activists from North Texas locked themselves inside the lobby of the Hilton Anatole in Dallas, Thursday morning, as another two dropped a banner from the upper stories of the hotel to greet lawmakers and corporate officials gathered for the 41st annual meeting of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).

Protesters Whytney Blythe and Joshua Carmona were removed by hotel security, within about an hour after they chained themselves inside, and released without charges.

State legislators and corporate lobbyist members from across the country will sit on task forces designed to review and vote on conservative "model" legislation that will likely travel from the Dallas Hilton Anatole's luxury conference rooms to official state house chambers, as lawmakers often pass off ALEC model bills as their own.

ALEC has generated legislation that advances the interests of its corporate members throughout state legislatures in the United States, as has been well documented, by organizations such as the Center for Media and Democracy. More than 98 percent of the organization's funding comes from corporations and corporate foundations, with the infamous petrochemical billionaire brothers, Charles and David Koch of Koch Industries, serving as some of the organization's largest donors.

ALEC media relations staffers refused to issue a credential to this reporter to attend and cover this week's meeting in Dallas, citing the following specific portion of ALEC's media relations policy:

ALEC does not allow journalists to register as media for the purpose of writing a personal blog, or for persons whose news outlet is funded by an individual; political candidate or party; nonprofit; or activist/lobbying organization.

Truthout meets this criterion however, as a nonprofit whose classification as a 501(c)(3) was granted because Truthout has not affiliated with any political, lobbying or activist organizations, as opposed to nonprofit organizations that engage in political campaigning, widely classified as 501(c)(4) organizations. It remains unclear why this reporter was not granted access to this week's meeting.

Task forces are expected to consider model bills that would make Medicaid unobtainable for many across states and broaden the privatization of public education through the expansion of charter schools.

ALEC's Climate Agenda

ALEC also plans to host panels this week on topics including teaching its members "How to Think and Talk About Climate and Energy Issues," and how to bolster exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG), as well as on the EPA's proposed carbon emissions rules and GMO food labeling proposals. Speakers include Texas Gov. Rick Perry, Texas Attorney General and Republican gubernatorial candidate Greg Abbott and Newt Gingrich.

Much of ALEC's agenda for this week's meeting is returning to the organization's focus on promoting the extraction, production and exportation of fossil fuels while putting up roadblocks for renewable energy initiatives where it can. LNG exports have come to the forefront as a priority for ALEC during this week's meeting, according Steve Horn a research fellow with DeSmogBlog.

"The two areas that ALEC is pushing . . . are LNG exports and compressed natural gas vehicle model legislation. Both of these have already passed in some state houses, so it's kind of a reverse in a way, where ALEC will take bills they like from other states and introduce them to be templates for the 50 states," Horn said during a press call.

According to ClimateProgress, ALEC has invited a representative from the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change, a group funded by the Heartland Institute, to deliver the group's recent report on questioning the current scientific consensus on the issue of climate change during this week's meeting. The Heartland Institute is well known for openly denying the existence of anthropogenic climate change and questioning the findings of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

"We do expect that ALEC will double down this year to try to undermine or even completely undo the EPA's clean power plan," said Aliya Haq, who directs climate change special projects for the Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC), referring to the EPA's proposal to cut emissions from power plants released last year.

She pointed to a previous annual meeting last December, in which ALEC members participated in workshops on how to obstruct the EPA's proposal months before the actual proposal was released. The NRDC tracked resolutions and bills from ALEC that emerged in state houses, after the meeting, designed to obstruct a state's ability to reduce carbon pollution. ALEC's environmental task force agenda for this week's meeting includes a new draft resolution opposing the EPA's clean power plan.

"That new draft has rhetoric like, 'the regulation of electricity is a sovereign state function' . . . there's a lot of kind of blustery language that they'll be pushing again once state legislators get back into swing," Haq said during a press call.

Protesters Greet ALEC in Dallas

As lawmakers schmoozed with corporate officials during the day's panels and luncheons, hundreds of protesters lined the streets outside the Hilton Anatole to oppose ALEC's agenda on issues ranging from labor rights, environmental policy, political spending, public education and health care.

A coalition of activists, including many union organizers and grassroots groups, under the banner "TEXposeALEC" arranged buses for up to 500 demonstrators, who rendezvoused at the Hilton Anatole for a rally Wednesday afternoon, themed "Don't Mess With Texas." Demonstrators also attended ALEC's welcome reception at Eddie Deen's Ranch later on in the day.

"[ALEC] is going to continue to push an anti-worker narrative," said Pamela Reséndiz, mobilization coordinator with the Dallas AFL-CIO. "Whether it's right to work, or whether they're trying to take away pensions from workers, or whether it is to cut out overtime pay . . . their policies affect everyone, regardless of whether you're in a union or not."

But as protesters rallied outside, ALEC officials inside revealed new plans to expand their organizations reach at the local level.

ALEC Could Be Coming to Your City Soon: The American City County Exchange

ALEC announced Wednesday the launch of a new offshoot that will apply ALEC's modus operandi of courting legislators with corporate lobbyists to draft model bills advancing corporate interests - to the local level.

This new arm of ALEC, the American City County Exchange (ACCE), held its first meeting Wednesday at the Hilton Anatole. ACCE will work in conjunction with ALEC to influence elected representatives in city and county council positions, while ALEC focuses on state legislatures. The Guardian reports:

IN ACCE's very first workshop under the simple title: "Privatization" - though in the final version the wording had been sanitized into: "Effective Tools for Promoting Limited Government."

A later workshop scheduled for Thursday is called: "Releasing Local Governments from the Grip of Collective Bargaining."

The Guardian also revealed through internal documents last year that ALEC started work on a "prodigal son project," meant to regain corporate donors that fled their affiliation with ALEC in the aftermath of George Zimmerman's not guilty verdict in the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. ALEC public relations image took a massive hit for its promotion of "stand-your-ground" laws across the United States.

But as ALEC works toward expanding its reach at all various level of government, progressives are beginning to forge a counterpart to ALEC with their very own legislative policy network, albeit using a different set of tactics entirely.

A Progressive ALEC?

A progressive ALEC could be in the birthing stages with the announcement of a merger of the American Legislative and Issue Campaign Exchange (ALICE) and the Progressive States Network. The groups hope to build an organization that would move progressive policies through state legislatures.

"For nearly a generation, conservatives have outpaced us at the business of movement-building in states. They have focused hard on it, poured resources into it, and have been ruthlessly efficient at it. Starting now, we will do the same," wrote Nick Rathod, executive director of ALICE, and Iowa State Sen. Joe Bolkcom, board chair of Progressive States Network, in a joint statement.

But unlike ALEC, the group hopes to embrace a more democratic decision making process and a transparent approach, by shunning the use of lobbyists and making their model policy publicly available, according to the Washington Post. The group's database already boasts 1,800 examples of model legislation progressives can get behind.

There's evidence to suggest the group may be forming at an advantageous time for progressive policy in the states. As Congress stalls in raising the minimum wage, a policy backed by a clear majority of Americans, 10 states and the District of Columbia passed minimum wage hikes just this year, according to the Post. It's with examples like this that ALICE and the Progressive States Network hope will spark momentum for their new group's initiatives.

But while there may be possibility for a progressive counterpart to ALEC on the horizon, progressives should keep in mind that ALEC is far from isolated in its scope and influence.

ALEC's Extended Family: The State Policy Network

"It's important to recognize that ALEC is really the center of a network," said Connor Gibson, a researcher with Greenpeace's investigation team, during a teach-in panel attended by many ALEC protesters in Dallas Wednesday.

ALEC played a role in founding the State Policy Network (SPN) in November 1991. SPN extends ALEC's reach far beyond its corporate and legislative members, comprising an ALEC-sponsored family that includes affiliated think tanks and trade associations in every state, as well as national members such as the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity and the Cato Institute.

The groups are well organized in the way they coordinate to support ALEC's conservative agenda to promote the privatization of the public sector, to attack renewable energy policies, and public employee unions and policies ALEC opposes.

Gibson said many of the think tanks and organizations involved in SPN are overwhelmingly funded through dark money groups and that some of these organizations disseminate faux news backed anonymously by corporate interests.

One SPN-affiliated organization is the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which has been focused on pushing ALEC's agenda in Texas to undermine public education in the state through the expansion of charter schools.

ALEC's Agenda in Texas

"Texans for Education Reform and some of these other groups are coming at us harder than ever, and ALEC is right in there with them," said Louis Malfaro, who is secretary-treasurer of the Texas American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The Texas AFT is working alongside other unions and groups such as the Texas Organizing Project to push back against efforts to create "home-rule" charter schools in the Dallas Independent School District, an effort that has been lead by Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings.

But ALEC's agenda in Texas, executed through local legislators, goes beyond the privatization of public schools. ALEC's agenda to eviscerate worker protections in Texas has taken the form of the state's deceptive "miracle economy," in which Texas created more minimum wage jobs, with little benefits and no upward social mobility, than any other state in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

"Sure, corporations are doing very well here in Texas," Jim Hightower, a former Texas agriculture commissioner, told Truthout. "But the working day people are being driven to the ground, rolling over in the ditch, small businessmen and family farmers too. [Perry] hasn't lifted a finger for them."

Hightower drew the connection between the dubious Texas "miracle economy" and this week's ALEC conference.

"[ALEC] is a direct pipeline from corporate America into our state legislative bodies, and then, right into law," he told Truthout.

Hightower also spoke about how the ALEC energy agenda greatly impacts oil- and gas-rich Texas, specifically citing a recent announcement by Exxon-Mobil, a long-time member of ALEC, that the company will double the size of its export facilities located at Beaumont and Port Arthur.

"They sell this stuff on the basis that this 'is going to solve our energy-dependence problem,' " he said. "Except that the energy is not going to stay in America, it's going to be exported to China, it's going to be exported to Brazil."

He also noted that claims by oil giants such as Exxon-Mobil that they help to boost the state economy are false because a great majority of the jobs they offer are temporary construction positions.

"There's a rebellion that's building in Texas over this - fracking, the tar sands pipeline, this is mostly happening to people who are a-political, conservative and largely Republican," he said.