

# THE Nation.

## Same Old ALEC

Its annual conference proved that ALEC is still cozy with the NRA—and still pushing the agenda of giant corporations and right-wing ideologues.

By Micah Uetracht – August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013

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The American Legislative Exchange Council wraps up its fortieth annual conference in Chicago today, after facing what organizers estimate to be the largest protest in the organization's history on Thursday.

Despite the recent exodus of dozens of corporations and a public attempt to tamp down some pieces of its more explicitly far-right agenda, this year's ALEC conference made clear that the group still wants to operate in secret, away from potential criticism—and with a group of corporations and interest groups that are as committed as ever to anti-worker, anti-environment, pro-gun legislation.

On Wednesday, I headed to the hotel's third floor to receive a press pass for the conference at a table staffed by two interns. Upon hearing the publication's name and receiving an editor's letter on *Nation* letterhead, one stiffened. He quickly disappeared behind a curtained-off area a few feet away to make a call, while his partner seemed unaffected.

"We just have to confirm; we'll be able to print one out in a moment," she stated, without explaining what was being confirmed.

Seconds became minutes and the seated woman seemed to grow nervous herself, repeating her previous statement before I saw, in my peripheral vision, the young man poke his head out behind the curtain to make a dramatic hand gesture to the young woman while whispering on the phone, then quickly darting out of view when I turned my head to look at him. After three increasingly comical hand signs and quick recoils, she stated exasperatedly, "I have no idea what you're saying."

Nonverbal secret hand signs having failed, he emerged from behind the curtain and opted for traditional verbal communication. "I'm sorry, media registration closed a week and a half ago. We can't let you in."

"But she just said you could print off a pass for me," I said.

"No, registration closed a week and a half ago," he repeated, ignoring my point.

A frustrating back-and-forth indicated little progress would be made here (*Nation* writer Rick Perlstein had a similar experience). Nearby was the exhibition area, so instead of returning to the elevator, I walked in. The exhibitors included prominent free-market think tanks like the

Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute; several pro-life groups; the National Rifle Association, who first brought Stand Your Ground laws to ALEC; the National Right to Work Committee; and the climate change-denying Heartland Institute—all groups whose influence can be seen in the model legislation ALEC has helped develop.

The Heartland Institute, an ALEC member, was a sponsor of Thursday's conference breakfast, as the Center for Media and Democracy (who produced the "ALEC Exposed" series with *The Nation* last year) reported today. The event carried a \$40,000 price tag and allowed the group's president, Joseph Bast, to speak on climate change denialism. Heartland drew headlines last year for a billboard associating "belief" in climate change with Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber.

The NRA's prominent presence at the conference exhibition hall was noteworthy, as the group had given the appearance in the past that they were no longer associated with ALEC. The NRA had been heavily involved in ALEC's Public Safety and Elections task force and hosted an annual shooting event providing ammo, guns and barbecue to conference attendees. After working with ALEC to spread Stand Your Ground laws throughout the country, both groups drew criticism in the wake of the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, due in part to Florida's version of the bill. ALEC disbanded the task force responsible for that legislation last year.

Despite ending the task force, ALEC appears to be maintaining a relationship with the NRA.

In the exhibition hall, I met Bill Brawley, an amiable, talkative Republican representing North Carolina's 103rd district in his state legislature. The convention was the third for Brawley, who emphasized that he is a strong supporter of much of the right-wing legislation that has sparked North Carolina's "Moral Mondays" protests. According to Brawley, he serves on ALEC's international relations task force. He sees the growing pushback against ALEC as part of a larger trend of the "demonization of the opposition in American political discourse" and "a sign that [ALEC's] ideas are good."

Framing ALEC as merely one pole within a "healthy marketplace of ideas," with the National Conference of State Legislators on the other, Brawley says "the reason you're hearing all this [opposition to ALEC] is because ALEC is very successful in opposing traditional progressive ideals." It isn't that the ALEC's corporate members enjoy an undue influence in politics; it's that ALEC happens to be on the side of an agenda "which we were democratically elected to carry out."

Brendan Fischer, general counsel for the Center for Media and Democracy, was in Chicago for the conference and finds this characterization questionable. "It seems very unlikely that people elected their legislators to go on a corporate-funded trip for three days so they can be lobbied by special interests," Fischer says.

If ALEC was indicative of a "healthy marketplace of ideas," he asks, why is the group so secretive? "Why isn't the public represented in these meetings? Why is it so difficult to access ALEC materials and model legislation?" Far from promoting a healthy level of ideological competition in the US, Fischer says, "ALEC exists almost exclusively to allow corporate interests to access legislators to push legislation that will support their very narrow agenda. There's no discussion of what's best for all people or a legislator's constituents. 'Both sides' aren't in the room at the ALEC conference—it's whoever can pay the most to sponsor a workshop or meeting. They get to call the shots."

Thursday's protest drew thousands of protesters from a wide variety of community, environmental and religious groups, as well as numerous unions. The rally shut down Monroe Street in the city's downtown, filling an entire block with protesters and spilling out onto streets on both ends.

At one point, Jorge Ramirez, president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, sarcastically "thanked" ALEC for bringing together such a diverse gathering of organizations, before encouraging the crowd to turn and face the hotel and point at the conference-goers above, chanting, "Shame on you!"

Standing on the street after the rally ended, Halli Mulei, a first officer and member of the United Chapter of Airline Pilots Association, said she and other pilots' union members' participation was "not about us personally—it's about supporting all workers."

"It's not un-American to want a decent wage and a pension," she says. "ALEC wants to destroy that."

Later in the day, after most of the rally and media had dispersed, police arrested six protesters, at one point using a metal barricade to push against a small group and tackling protesters in the crowd.

The exposure ALEC has faced over the past three years has led many of the world's largest companies, including General Electric, Amazon, McDonald's, General Motors and others, to exit the organization. But ALEC still wields enormous influence in state legislatures across the country. By the CMD's count, 466 bills resembling ALEC's model legislation have been introduced this year alone. And even with ALEC claiming it no longer pushes some of its most noxious policies like Stand Your Ground and voter ID, such bills have continued to spread across the country.

Chicago's mass protests seem to indicate that a pushback to ALEC could be growing as the group's reactionary agenda is exposed and groups like organized labor join the fight. But given the group's collective corporate power, impressive recent legislative achievements and continued ties to groups like the NRA, ALEC does not appear to be slowing or moderating its activity in the near future.