

Reclaiming Democracy

The Campaign to Challenge Corporate Power and Assert the People's Rights

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WILPF has a long history of taking on the most fundamental issues facing humanity and staying committed to them for the long haul, rather than seeking simple or superficial solutions. This is evident in the U.S. Section's choice of campaigns for 2000-2003. Members of WILPF's Committee on Corporations, Trade, and Democracy have sometimes found themselves overwhelmed as we explore the scope and depth of corporate power in our country and its impact on the world. This article is provided to help frame the issue to which the U.S. WILPF Section has committed itself for the next three years.

Why this campaign is important

The corporate form has existed for hundreds of years, but in the last century its impact on people's lives has increased exponentially. It is important to understand that the prime directive of all corporations is to *increase shareholder wealth*. No matter how well meaning a corporation may seem to be, its purpose is not to create jobs, take care of the community, fund schools, or provide healthcare — its purpose is to make as much money as possible for its investors. In pursuit of ever-increasing profits, a variety of societal and environmental harms inevitably occur, whether or not these are intended by the people who work in the corporations. The past decade of accelerating transnational corporate growth has demonstrated clearly the oppressive and destructive capacity of this institutional form. The powerful executives who run the world's multinationals control society in a way that undermines democracy, social justice, labor rights and the environment.

WILPF's campaign has two equally important goals. One is to redefine the relationship that currently exists and return economic institutions to their rightful place as subservient to the needs of people. We can begin by educating ourselves about the roots of illegitimate corporate power and how it has colonized our minds, usurped our governments, and deteriorated our lives and the natural world that sustains us. The other goal is to reclaim democracy by exploring what it means, examining our own behaviors, and experimenting with truly democratic ways of interacting. Facing these twin challenges can help create new social structures that better serve the needs of all people.

This work is particularly important for those of us in the United States, where the corporate form is the most entrenched, sophisticated, and voracious and the citizens the most accepting. Corporations in the United States determine in large part the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the news we see, the people we elect, the jobs we have. When we remain silent, we continue to benefit from corporate exploitation at the expense of other people around the world. By speaking out, we challenge the evangelical lies with which corporate globalization is being triumphed as the solution for the world's problems.

Understanding the depth and breadth of corporate power

Corporations are legal creations designed to protect a limited number of people in their accumulation of wealth, and as such, they have no obligations to people or the planet. Competition drives corporations inexorably toward greater profits to increase their stock prices or go out of business, and increased profits must eventually be achieved through reductions in expenses. The corners that are cut negatively impact the number of jobs, wages and benefits for workers, and protection of the environment. Furthermore, financial systems do not fully account for all expenses; for example, corporations do not budget for the cost of recycling packaging or toxic site cleanup. In other words, profits are privatized and costs are socialized.

Capitalism is characterized by private ownership of goods, so only those with resources can continue to benefit from the system of investment. This creates a tendency toward monopoly and over time expands the gap between the rich and the poor. Decisions are increasingly made to benefit a few at the expense of the many. The resulting power imbalance drives societies further and further from democracy.

Proponents of capitalism frequently tout the alleged benefits of competition, but in patriarchal systems, corporate competition can encourage the worst possible excesses of human behavior. Because of the relentless search for increasing profits, individuals are constantly tempted to make unethical decisions in order to stay in business. Those who stoop the lowest eventually set the standard for all, keeping a steady downward pressure on