

Challenging Corporate Power, Asserting the People's Rights

Session I — Introduction

The first session of the study group provides an opportunity for the group members to meet each other, find out about the design and content of the course, agree upon discussion and facilitation guidelines, work out logistical details, and conduct an initial discussion. The objectives of the study groups are:

- (1) to frame learning and discussion in ways that focus on the **root causes** of corporate and state oppression
- (2) to direct efforts for change in law and culture toward those public officials and public bodies that must take the authority to place economic institutions and all corporate entities under the control of a **self-governing people**

Begin the session by allowing everyone to introduce themselves and tell why they are interested in this particular study group. Then the convener of the meeting can lead the group through the following material.

Structure: Before every meeting each person receives a set of materials (a cover sheet and readings) to read and reflect on before the discussion (reading will take 1-2 hours per session). The study packet includes suggested questions for the discussion, but groups are free to create their own questions in addition to, or instead of, the ones in the packet.

The reading materials have *not* been selected to provide a balanced view of corporate power and its impacts on countries and people in all parts of the world. In modern society we are inundated with the corporate perspective on almost every issue. These materials are intended to provide pieces of the largely untold story of how corporations have come to dominate our lives in the name of profit and at the expense of people and the planet.

The study groups represent an opportunity to create *intentional laboratories* to experience and practice democracy. This initial session focuses on the process the group chooses to use in its discussions. Democracy is a word we use daily in the United States, but many of us have not had the opportunity or motivation to think deeply about what it means to be a self-governing people. The study groups provide us with an opportunity to challenge ourselves to notice and explore both content *and* process during discussions.

Discussion Guidelines: Allow each person in the group to describe how much experience she or he has with group discussion. Review Reading 1, "Study Group Guidelines — Process and Facilitation," as needed. For some groups this material may already be familiar territory, but for others, it should help the group structure itself. Remember: this is *your* study group! Design processes that work for you.

Logistics: The date, time, frequency, place, and duration of each session are up to the group. Most groups find two hours per discussion to be about right. We recommend that the group meet weekly or every other week to maintain continuity with the material and to develop the cohesiveness of the group. (If an already-intact group is using these materials, monthly meetings may be ok.) At this initial session, the group will need to:

- develop its own set of discussion guidelines (use Reading 1, if needed)

- determine when and where it will meet next
- establish a process for obtaining the readings (who needs photocopies, who can get material off the WILPF website)
- distribute the readings for the next session (as needed)
- select a facilitator for the next session (we strongly recommend the democratic approach of rotating facilitation responsibilities among the members of the group)

We suggest that each person obtain a three-ring notebook to keep all their materials in one place. We also recommend that you use recycled paper and use both sides when making photocopies.

The people in each group represent a range of experience and knowledge about the subjects for discussion and other related topics. A few of the readings are somewhat academic and intellectually challenging; others are more easily accessible. In the evaluation forms that WILPF has been receiving from around the country, some people find a particular reading stimulating and provocative while others find it confusing or even useless. This diversity of experience and response to the readings fuels each group's discussions.

Optimal group size is 6-10 people to ensure enough viewpoints for lively discussion and adequate opportunity for everyone to participate.

An evaluation form is included with the materials in this session. We ask that each person in the group, or the group as a whole, please provide us with this feedback. It has been extremely helpful to us to improve the study materials and find out what works and what doesn't. You may wish to fill in the form as you go, especially comments about which readings you found particularly useful or useless, which is why the form is provided now.

Supplementary Materials: In addition to the readings for each session, there is a list of additional material that groups may use in a variety of ways. The primary purpose for this is to provide any individual or the entire group with an opportunity to dive deeper into the topic if they wish. Here are some possible ways the group might use these materials:

- One person might review one or more of the items and then provide a synopsis for the group.
- The group may be so intrigued with a particular topic that they want to spend more time on it before going on to the following sessions.
- After completing all ten sessions, the group may wish to continue meeting and can select from any of these supplementary materials for further discussions.

When a reading has been taken from a book, we provide the title, author, and publishing information so anyone interested can obtain it (note: we urge you to use the library and purchase books from independent bookstores whenever possible). Some of the materials are available on the internet. Some of them are pamphlets or videotapes, for which we provide the publishing organization. If there is no publishing information, the material is available from WILPF.

Please let us know about any supplementary materials that you recommend adding to the list. Also let us know if we need to make any corrections regarding where to obtain materials.

Discussion: After reviewing the course and working out whatever logistical needs the group has, use the remaining time in this initial session for the first discussion. Distribute the materials for this session and allow everyone five minutes to read the campaign proposal remarks by Virginia

Rasmussen (Reading 4) and then discuss your reactions, concerns, and ideas. (In addition, or alternatively, you may wish to use the first three questions from the Q&A document, Reading 3.)

Readings:

- 1 – WILPF fact sheet (1 page)
- 2 – Study Group Guidelines- Process and Facilitation (4 pages)
- 3 - Campaign questions and answers (7 pages)
- 4 – “Remarks on the Campaign Proposal,” by Virginia Rasmussen (2 pages)

Supplementary Materials:

- The Constitution of the United States of America. All members of the group may wish to have a copy of the Constitution; at a minimum, we suggest that at least one person have it handy so that the group can refer to it, if desired, during discussions. The Constitution can be obtained on the internet at www.house.gov or at a variety of other websites by searching on “U. S. Constitution”.
- Suggested Readings (see Appendix)
- Campaign Glossary (see Appendix)

WILPF FACT SHEET

Founded in 1915, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is the oldest and largest international women's peace and justice organization in the world.

Since World War I, WILPF has taken action to oppose the root causes of war, and to promote peace, social justice, racial equality and women's empowerment.

WILPF has an international office located in Geneva, Switzerland; a United Nations office in New York City; and a national office in Philadelphia.

WILPF members have included five Nobel Peace Prize laureates: founders Jane Addams and Emily Greene Balch (the only two American women to win the peace prize prior to Jody Williams), Linus Pauling, Alva Myrdal, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

There are WILPF sections in more than 40 countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, El Salvador, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Korea, Lebanon, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Palestine, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, French Polynesia, Portugal, Russia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Venezuela, and the United States.

Recent WILPF Projects:

Women Challenge US Policy; Building Peace of Justice in the Middle East:

WILPF's Middle East campaign will examine the role of U.S. policy in the dynamics of current conflicts. It will educate communities to policy dimensions seldom discussed regarding Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. What economic interests underlie the power struggles in the region? What U.S. policy changes will end violence and promote justice? The campaign will work to bridge gaps, engage diverse groups in developing a women's vision for U.S. foreign policy, and join with women in the region to claim U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325's promise that women's active participation can bring peaceful, democratic resolution to the conflicts.

Save the Water Campaign:

Water is the earth's most precious resource. Access to safe and affordable water is a human right. Local, democratic control of water is essential for food security and peace. Everywhere accelerating privatization threatens public control over access to water while scarcity looms from overuse and pollution. WILPF's campaign starts with developing water literacy and awareness that the protection and use of water is a community issue. WILPF-fostered local water research and planning groups empower communities to take responsibility for their own water quality and availability. The campaign seeks to be a catalyst for a national mobilization to "take back the water" and move this vital resource for all life into the Public Trust."

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Study Group Guidelines — Process and Facilitation

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire claims that through conscious efforts of education, reflection, and action people can build movements that change conditions. Meeting that goal requires that we **define ourselves and our communities**, deciding what a democratic society should look like and how it ought to work. Study groups — small, democratic, and participatory — are a proven method for social learning. They offer a way to voice our own histories and experiences and to engage one another in matters of our common life. Study groups give us an opportunity to pay as much attention to our **process** of interaction as the **content** of what we discuss, since democracy is something you *do*, not something you *have*.

Discussion Tips

- **Stay focused without being rigid.** Most people do not find a rambling discussion useful.
- **Don't allow the most talkative people to dominate.** Effective group discussion guidelines enable such behavior to be interrupted without hurt feelings.
- **Encourage comments from quiet participants.** Create space that welcomes this without putting anyone on the spot. Examples: "Is there anyone who has not yet spoken?" "Are there some ideas we might be missing in this discussion?"
- **Encourage active listening.** Hearing and understanding what people say and responding appropriately helps a group stay on track and fosters respect for the process and the participants.
- **Pay attention to the group process** as well as the discussion content. Sometimes called a "vibes watcher," one person can take on this role (rotating each time), or anyone in the group can make observations about the style of interaction at any time.
- **Use conflict constructively.** Avoid personalizing disagreements and keep different views focused on the issue at hand.
- **Pauses and silences are fine.** They allow thinking and reflection.
- **The discussion can be synthesized, summarized, and refocused occasionally,** a leadership function anyone can provide at a given moment.
- **If necessary, one person takes on the role of being timekeeper.** If the group has agreed upon a time limit for each person to speak, then someone should have a watch to keep track. This role should be rotated.
- **No "experts" are needed.** There are no "right" answers. This work is about sharing views, developing understanding, and mobilizing energy.
- **Make sure the physical space is comfortable** and conducive to relaxed democratic conversation.

Study Group Facilitation Techniques

There are many styles and purposes of facilitation, but this document does not attempt to mention or describe them all. Facilitation for a meeting at which a group is trying to make decisions and adhere to an agenda can be different from a general discussion like that for a study group, although many aspects may be similar.

What does a facilitator do? The primary function of the facilitator in a study group is one of traffic cop — the main purpose is to keep the conversation moving by managing who speaks

when. At the beginning of the session, the facilitator should call the group to begin and review the process by which the group will proceed for the discussion period. It is a good idea to post the agreed-upon discussion guidelines and review them. Some groups rotate a role of writing a synopsis of the readings and sharing that at the beginning. Others start by deciding whether they will allow a certain amount of time for each question or article, or, alternatively, let the facilitator or the group just decide organically when it is time to move on. You may come up with other procedural matters that are important to the members of your group that the facilitator manages. Another option is that each facilitator may do things slightly differently and begin the session by proposing a process that the group accepts. Any of these and other variations are possible.

How can a facilitator help people participate? When the discussion gets going, it's not uncommon for more than one person to want to speak at a time, so here is a commonly used facilitation technique. As one person talks, other people who wish to speak next raise their hands and the facilitator notes that person's name on a list. The person who's raised her/his hand and the facilitator make brief eye contact, the facilitator nods so the person knows they've been added to the list, and then that person can put their hand down, relax, and listen until s/he is called on to speak. The facilitator keeps a written list (some people can do it in their heads) and then calls on people in the order they were added to the list. If the discussion is energetic and/or if the facilitator wishes to make sure everyone is on the list, when calling on the next speaker s/he might say something like, "I have Roy, then Kris, then Chuck, then Charlotte. Is that everyone?" That way, if someone who already raised their hand is missing from the list, they can be sure to get added to it right then.

Here are some dynamics to observe while managing this process. It is not uncommon for the facilitator to give 100% of their attention to the person who's speaking, but a better amount is about 90%. A good metaphor is driving a car. When you're driving, it's recommended that every ten seconds or so you should check your rear view and side mirrors and glance out your side windows so you always know what's going on around you, because things are constantly changing on the road. The same is true when you're facilitating a discussion. It's important to listen to the person speaking, but every ten seconds or so you should unobtrusively glance around the group to see if anyone has their hand up. People could think of something they want to say at any point when someone else is speaking, and since people are often eager to share their comments, it's important to get them on the list so they can relax and really concentrate on the current speaker without worrying that they won't get their turn.

Note that the facilitator can put him or herself on the list as well. Being the facilitator does not mean you do not participate in the conversation.

Sometimes people worry that if there are several people ahead of them on the list, they'll forget what they wanted to say. You might jot down a few words or a phrase that will reconnect you to your idea, since other speakers may take the discussion in a different direction before you get to speak. If this happens, you might start by saying something like, "I'd like to go back to what Audrey was saying about..."

What about someone who monopolizes airtime? Some groups need to set a discussion guideline of limiting how long each person speaks. It is a matter of respect for the group that no one person dominates the conversation, but some people don't have a very good

sense of time and just really aren't aware of how long they speak, or don't realize when they're starting to repeat themselves. If this is happening, the facilitator might gently say something like, "Are you almost finished?" giving the person a chance to complete their thought and reminding them that it's time to stop. If a facilitator needs to be more directive, s/he could say something like, "OK, I'm going to cut you off now" to a particularly loquacious person, especially after they've been given a warning that their time is up. Because the study group is small, you are not likely to need such a time length guideline or intervention technique, but it's handy to know about it in case the group decides it would be helpful.

Avoiding conversations of two. A dynamic to watch for is cross-talk. Remember that this is a *group* discussion, so one goal is to avoid a dialog between just two people in the group. If the facilitation is very casual, the way this sometimes happens is that one person is speaking and another asks them a short, direct question (usually without being on the list) that the speaker feels compelled to answer, and sometimes this can happen several times while the rest of the group just watches. In this case, the group counts on the facilitator to remind people to raise their hands so everyone gets a fair chance to speak, although anyone in the group should feel empowered to remind the group of the discussion guidelines. You can simply say something like, "I'd like to remind everyone that we've agreed to raise our hands before we speak."

Points of clarification. There is a behavior that looks similar to cross-talk, but isn't, and is an exception to people being on the list. This is called asking for a point of clarification. If a person can't hear the speaker or doesn't understand a word they've used, or just doesn't understand what they're saying, they can immediately ask for a point of clarification. Examples are: "Excuse me, did you say 'permeate' or 'punctuate'?" or "I'm sorry, what did you say after 'In 1886'?" or "What does 'tessellate' mean?" or "I'm completely not following you." (This last one is rare.) A point of clarification is NOT, for example, "Based on what you said, what kind of items do you think should be on a party platform?" A speaker's response to a real point of clarification is usually short and does not break the speaker's concentration or flow while it enables the listener to understand what the speaker is already saying, not expanding on it. It is appropriate for the questioner to ask the facilitator if they can ask a point of clarification. Sometimes the questioner asks the speaker directly, but then that momentarily puts the speaker into the role of facilitator without the agreement of the group. Sometimes this puts the speaker in an awkward position, especially if the group is counting on the facilitator to keep the group organized.

Staying on topic. One of the most challenging parts of being the facilitator in these study groups is trying to keep the conversation on track. People drawn to these discussions have a wide variety of experience and knowledge, and it's easy to get sidetracked onto all kinds of interesting topics. You want this other information to enrich your conversation — that's the whole point of bringing disparate people together — but you also want to try to keep it tethered to the topic at hand. Anyone in the group who feels the discussion is straying too far should feel empowered to point this out or just ask the question "Have we gotten too far off topic?" so the group can decide whether to continue that thread or shift back to where they started. But it is a good idea for the facilitator to be particularly alert to this phenomenon and watch for it.

Including all participants in the discussion. In any group discussion there may be a few people who are quieter than others. In these study groups the number of participants is small so that everyone has enough time to participate meaningfully, but some people may have less to say about one topic than another. Who is quieter in any given discussion may change from meeting to meeting. The facilitator should try to keep track of who hasn't spoken and check in periodically to see if they want to participate. This can be unobtrusive — for example, "Does anyone who hasn't spoken yet want to speak?" — which can prevent putting someone on the spot. Or you can be more directive — for example, "Tim, Brenda, we haven't heard from you in awhile. Do either of you want to say something or pass for now?" Some groups use a guideline that says no one should speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once. If you choose to implement this, then the facilitator needs to keep track of who's spoken and who hasn't. People should not feel that they *must* speak, just be given the opportunity to do so.

Occasional need for summarizing. Another role the facilitator *may* perform is to summarize the discussion periodically, particularly when it is time to move to another question. Again, anyone in the group should feel empowered to do this when it seems appropriate. The group may not feel the need for summaries — this is something that is often necessary in groups that need to make decisions, which is not the purpose of a study group. Some facilitators find it easier to make summaries than others do, so you may just leave it to whoever is facilitating to decide. Also, there may be no real summary to make — this is, after all, a discussion group, and each person can make a summary for him or herself.

Sample Agenda

- **Checkin.** This is an opportunity for participants to build community, sharing something that's going on with them or a thought or question related to the day's discussion. A limited amount of time (usually one minute) is allotted for each person.
- **Agenda review.** Go over what is planned for the discussion and allow modifications or additions by the group. Agree upon an ending time and, if appropriate, allocate time blocks to certain questions, readings, or other topics.
- **Review the discussion guidelines.**
- If the group has decided that each time one person should perform these functions, **assign or confirm a timekeeper, notetaker, and/or vibes watcher.**
- If the group has decided to use this format, **one or two people can make a brief presentation** of the materials to get the discussion rolling. This should be highlights only to ensure that everyone is "on the same page."
- **Facilitated discussion.**
- **Plan for the next session.** Distribute the readings and choose a facilitator and any other needed roles.
- **Wrap-up and evaluation** (what worked well for people; what did not).

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

Below are questions that have been raised since this campaign was selected at the U.S. Section Congress in June, 1999. The campaign committee hopes that you'll add to these answers and create new questions in our exploration of democratic dialog.

1. Why is this campaign important and what are its primary goals?

The corporate form has existed for hundreds of years, but in the last century its impact on people's lives has increased exponentially. The prime directive of all corporations is to increase shareholder wealth. In pursuit of ever-increasing profits, a variety of societal and environmental harms inevitably occurs, whether or not these are intended by the people who work in 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 U.S. 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 speak-ing out, we challenge the evangelical lies with which corporate globalization is being triumphed as the solution for the world's problems.

2. What kinds of activities will happen in this campaign?

Like all of WILPF's work, the kind of comprehensive change we envision will not happen overnight. The core issue is not corporations or even our economic systems, although they are integrally connected. We feel that the greatest challenge is to shift our energy toward focusing on democracy — what it is, what it is not, and what it can be. This requires us to examine who we are as human beings. What is our nature, our potential? What are our capabilities? Grounded in such critical analysis, we can choose more effective strategies and actions.

WILPF branches have an expanded opportunity with this campaign to become intentional laboratories that model truly democratic processes in our communities. The work begins at home — each of us must look at our own colonization, dependencies, beliefs, practices, denial systems, and how we interact with others. There is much we can learn from studying other groups, such as native peoples, about social interaction and building sustainable communities. Focusing on democracy, we may find a fresh perspective with which to build bridges to other groups and find allies with whom we can work in coalition.

This does not mean we should end efforts that challenge one corporate law, permit, or abuse at a time. Urgent situations deserve our attention and are excellent opportunities to educate ourselves and our communities about not only the injustice at hand, but also about the illegitimate authority of corporations and the kind of democracy we can work to establish. We can research state constitutions, laws governing corporate charters and what it takes to revoke one, and the history of people's efforts to keep corporations subordinate to their legislatures. What laws have been removed from the books that would benefit the public good by being reinstated? The recent "vic-tories" against tobacco corporations have increased public awareness of corporate excess and abuse. How can we capitalize on this situation for deeper change? How do we critique our work to make certain that we frame it as sovereign citizens who belong in charge? As we move past the first phase of this campaign, we look forward to exciting ideas coming from the branches for more activities.

3. Do people really want true democracy? What would it take?

We encourage WILPF communities to explore these questions. Cornel West, speaking of the "colonization of our minds," said that it's difficult "even to imagine what a free and democratic society would look like." Here are some characteristics you might explore. People in such a society might have to:

- figure out where we want to go and what we want to be instead of being told; in such circumstances, our social structures would unfold from this perspective, not the other way around
- be adults, fully responsible for our actions and accountable for our lives; this would require us to let go of the comfort of hierarchy and excuses like "it's someone else's job/fault" and "no one told me"
- respect, trust, support, and listen to others; contemplate non-judgmentally what they say and do
- embrace the complexity, diversity, and paradox in our lives; accept that there aren't simple, easy answers, although our lives can be much simpler
- give according to our ability and take according to our need
- deal constructively with our personal wounds and fears
- let go of our illusions of safety
- be fully alive instead of being emotionally numb
- share ourselves and our resources rather than be selfish

4. How did corporations get to be so big and powerful?

The colonial war for independence from England was fomented primarily by a small number of white, propertied men who wanted the freedom to exploit the Americas on their own and had grown tired of sharing their burgeoning wealth with the English ruling class. They rejected not only the monarchy but also the large trading companies chartered by the king and the colonies to control property and commerce. Thus the framers of the Constitution provided for corporate charters to be issued by state legislators — the people’s representatives — not presidents, governors, or judges. A charter defined and limited the corporation, with specific provisions about what it could do and for how long, and corporate charters were frequently revoked when violated.

But the fundamental purpose of the Constitution was to protect the rich. Despite their initial resistance to corporations, the wealthy in the U.S. increasingly used them as shields for their personal fortunes. Growing in size and numbers during and after the Civil War, corporations began influencing legislators, bribing public officials, and employing lawyers to write new laws and file court cases. Gradually legislators increased corporate charter length while they decreased corporate liability and citizen authority over corporate structure, governance, production, and labor.

The Supreme Court was established as the ultimate protector of the propertied class. In this role it has rendered what otherwise seem to be bizarre judgments. In 1868 the U.S. ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, ostensibly to guarantee the rights of freed slaves. But as Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black noted in 1938, “Of the cases in this court in which the Fourteenth Amendment was applied during the first fifty years after its adoption, less than one-half of one per-cent invoked it in protection of the Negro race, and more than fifty percent asked that its benefits be extended to corporations.” This was possible because in 1886, in *Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad*, the Court cited the Fourteenth Amendment, declaring that private corporations were “persons de-serving the law’s due process.” The decision was significant in light of the fact that women, Native Americans, and most African American men were still denied the right to vote.

It took the wealthy only a century to change the corporation from an entity subservient to the public good into a “person” with legal rights that exceed those of human beings. There have been many struggles against the corporation in the century since *Santa Clara*, but the legacy of the Robber Barons has, in many ways, strangled democracy just as effectively as the king against whom the colonists initially railed.

5. Don’t regulatory agencies effectively monitor corporations and protect citizens and the environment from harm?

Regulatory agencies are one of the biggest public relations success stories in the U.S. The first such agency, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), was created in 1887 to mollify a public sick of railroad corruption. But the ICC was actually a creation of the railroad executives. Weary from years of fierce price cutting and rate wars, and wary of populist uprising against them, they hatched a plan to protect themselves from consumers and each other. The ICC was

so successful for the railroads that other industries — such as insurance, meat packing, food, banking, and communications — soon acquired their own regulatory agencies.

These big corporate players sought an escape from the rigors of competition through control of markets, government-borne costs of infrastructure and quality control, and direct or indirect price maintenance or guaranteed rates of return. But even though the government provides these services with taxpayer dollars, all profits still belong to the stockholders and owners. Criticism by those who saw through the charade began with the ICC and has resurfaced periodically, but regulatory agencies remain because they effectively protect the corporations that control politicians today as much as — or more than — they did at the end of the 19th century.

Some of the recurring criticisms are that:

- (1) regulatory agencies are unaccountable to voters, with discretionary authority that is too easily abused;
- (2) they combine legislative, executive, and judicial power in one place;
- (3) their personnel and outlook reflect the views of the corporations they are supposed to be regulating;
- (4) since individuals and small businesses can't afford the time and expense to fully participate, large corporations dominate; and
- (5) procedural considerations are so intricate and demanding that matters of fairness, justice, and overall policy questions, not to mention common sense, are ruled irrelevant if they come up at all.

Any one of these five would present a serious obstacle to democratic control. Together, they are so formidably anti-democratic that their existence is a clear indictment of the disconnection between people and our sovereignty. Under the regulatory system, harms done by corporations are violations of the *law*, not violations of *people and communities*. This enables corporations to employ legions of lawyers skilled in defense, offense, and evasion to bring about delay, distortion, denial, dilution of charges, dismissal of charges, and nonpayment of fines. Harms to real people are often unpunished and unchanged for many years while the corporations continue to accumulate profits.

It is all too easy to find collusion between corporations and the agencies that are supposed to regulate them — not unlike the relationship between the Pentagon and military contracting corporations. Former officials with the Food and Drug Administration, for example, can be found in the executive ranks of companies like Monsanto, and vice versa. Corporations are allowed to submit their own research data proving product efficacy and safety, but since the data is classified as a trade secret, it's not available to the wider scientific community for verification. Academic institutions further complicate the mix. A revolving door between universities and agencies also exists, and corporations often provide significant funding for “independent” research that invariably supports the products and services under consideration.

Even when committed people work for them, regulatory agencies are underfunded, understaffed, and usurped by powerful legislators who are influenced by campaign contributions and constituent pressure for jobs. What's more, regulatory agencies make great red herrings. Corporate public relations teams blame them for economic ills and bureaucratic delays, and the public blames them for not doing their jobs. Attention is deflected away from corporations as the source of the problems and toward efforts to reform regulatory agencies. That the concept of the regulatory agency is inherently flawed doesn't even make it into the discussion. Until we can move this idea to the center of our debates, we cannot open up new strategies for change and greater democracy.

6. What's so bad about corporate power?

Corporations are legal creations designed to protect a limited number of people in their accumulation of wealth. Because their primary concern is increasing shareholder value, 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 cut negatively impact the number of jobs, wages and benefits for workers, and protection of the environment. Furthermore, accounting 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.

7. Aren't corporations making the world a better place by becoming more socially responsible, creating jobs, contributing to education and the arts, and being good corporate citizens?

"Socially responsible corporation" is an oxymoron created by corporate public relations teams. Corporations, by definition, have no responsibility to society; their stated purpose is to increase shareholder wealth. Likewise, there is no such thing as a "good corporate citizen"; corporations are legal creations, not citizens. Individual people at corporations may genuinely care about their communities and use corporate wealth to invest in them; however, this occurs only when the corporation is adequately profitable and usually because the corporation realizes valuable public support as a result. Corporations only create jobs and engage in socially responsible acts if it is in their best interest. Because corporations have so much wealth and power, people are rendered supplicants to them, grateful for their apparent generosity, but this relationship is upside down. It is corporations who should be subservient to sovereign citizens and accountable to the public good.

Most people are so disconnected from the political process that they are unaware of how corporate welfare contributes to this cycle. Government transfers as much as \$167 billion

annually to corporations in the form of outright cash payments, provision of below-cost products and services (such as loans and insurance), tax breaks, laws that help business bottom lines, and government purchases of goods and services from businesses at inflated prices (even though laws have been passed to prevent this). All of this government incentive to businesses can leave public coffers bare, creating an ideal opportunity for corporations to acquire public gratitude by contributing to schools, museums, and symphonies. It's a highly successful scheme for co-opting public power and colonizing the public mind.

8. Isn't competition a good thing, ensuring our ability to choose the best quality products and services we want at affordable prices?

The alleged benefits of competition are another product of corporate public relations teams. Healthy competition is a normal part of life on planet Earth, 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 down-ward pressure on the level of acceptable behavior. Excuses like "if we don't, some-one else will" and "everyone else is doing it" are frequently invoked.

In the competitive marketplace, the only measure of comparison is the best quality for the lowest price. Rampant consumer-ism conspires with this system and is an essential component for keeping it alive. Since consumers are distant from production, they seldom know what corners are cut to achieve "affordable" prices. Indoctrinated to amass as many possessions as possible — to be consumers rather than citizens — many people become concerned only about the price of a good or service instead of the condition of workplaces, the wages paid, the pollution of the environment during production, or the disposal process once their purchase is no longer useful.

Institutionalized cooperative structures, processes, and behaviors have the potential to provide for the needs of people far more effectively without increasing personal wealth at the expense of others. Until we let go of our need to feel we are better than others by getting ahead of them, competition will continue to be viewed as a good thing by the few who benefit from the system as well as the masses on the bottom who believe they can eventually do the same, even though their actual chances are almost nonexistent.

9. Why would corporations want to degrade the environment when they or their loved ones live there, too?

Those benefiting most from corporate practices don't live where the greatest degradation occurs. The more wealth one has, the more one is insulated from social violence, overcrowded communities, environmental pollution, and toxic exposure, and the more likely one is to receive good healthcare, a quality education, and opportunities for a satisfying life.

In the United States, there are millions of people in wealthy communities, which, in this context, includes the middle class. When we are surrounded by so much wealth, so many like ourselves, and such a variety of diversions it is easy to believe that social problems suffered by the majority of the world's population are not quite real or even ignore them altogether. Job security and continuity of lifestyle is a real concern even for people with wealth (especially those in the middle class), and denial is a way to get past the uncomfortable idea that one is inflicting harm, however indirectly.

Apparently personal gain outweighs possible risk for some people. Many corporate spokespersons appear to believe their own rhetoric. Tobacco executives smoke cigarettes, agribusiness scientists eat bioengineered food, automotive engineers drive fuel-inefficient cars. They scoff at criticisms of their products or practices and insist that they are not harmful. Since much of the damage can take years or decades to manifest itself, these reassurances can be seductive. We can ask ourselves, "What does this person have to gain if I believe him/her? Will any harm to me impact this person negatively?"

10. How can we make a difference without financial leverage when the issue is so big?

WILPF's campaign committee for Challenging Corporate Power and Asserting the People's Rights believes that democracy really matters. Our own explorations of this issue have convinced us of the importance of claiming our sovereign rights for more satisfying lives, if not our very survival. The structures we have that are called "democratic" pale beside the possibility of what we could have.

It is true that the challenge is enormous — corporations have money, legislators, judges, and the majority of public opinion on their side. For inspiration, we can look to the history of change effected by committed people who abolished slavery, achieved women's suffrage, protected laborers, and improved civil rights for people of color, gays and lesbians, and older and displaced people. These struggles took place over many decades and required an enormous change in values for the majority of the population. In contemporary times, we may be hampered in a way that our forebears were not because instant gratification has become such a widespread expectation. Further, our omnipresent media suggests that if you are not famous or influencing hordes of people, your efforts don't count and you shouldn't bother.

All of us who undertake this work must believe we make a difference. Even if it appears to be a small effort, it's not. Reclaiming our power and our sovereignty is a significant achievement! Decolonizing our minds so that we may explore new social structures will enrich our own and others' lives. We cannot control what others do, but we can make our own choices. Modeling the kind of truly democratic behavior we seek is a critical first step, and our work will attract others who will bring fresh inspiration to augment our efforts. This is making a difference at a fundamental and crucial level. We look forward to sharing the work with you.

Challenging Corporate Power, Asserting the People's Rights
Remarks on the Campaign Proposal
WILPF National Congress, June 23-27, 1999 • St. Louis, Missouri
by Virginia Rasmussen

There have been four pervasive patriarchal institutions in the history of Western Civilization. These are the classical empires, the ecclesiastical institutions, the nation state and the modern corporation. But the **WORST** of these is the modern corporation.

It holds this distinction because it exerts the functions and powers of all those other institutions AND more.

Like the classical empires, the giant corporations have become global empire. Like the ecclesiastical institutions, they preach a faith and pronounce what is of value.

Like the nation states, they are now our government, and determined to bring us our future.

In addition, the modern corporation increasingly determines the nature, content and our personal roles within the economy, the world of work and the educational system. They steadily shape the nature of our communities, of our very planet, and our relationship with both.

The biggest of these giant multinationals are larger in income and budget than most nation-states and growing.

Along with this relentless growth, the world has been experiencing “ever deepening environmental degradation, widespread unemployment and economic insecurity, displacement of peoples and cultures, violence against and trafficking in women and girls, pandemic poverty, an unraveling of the social fabric, and an assault on democratic institutions and spiritual values.”

This proposal, “Challenging Corporate Power, Asserting the People's Rights,” recognizes and responds to the need for a new kind of struggle to wrest power over life, law and culture from these corporate bodies.

The proposal focuses WILPF's efforts to do this work in three major realms:

- our preparation and that of others in our communities for a campaign against locally-felt corporate takings of **OUR** power,
- the carrying out of that campaign, and
- the merging of that work in a way that allows us to conduct some sort of national event or action that asserts the people's rights OVER corporations.

Such campaigns might center around (1) the struggle to prevent a megastore's

assaultive entry into a local economy; (2) holding public meetings on the question of why your community SHOULD and how it MIGHT establish democratic control OVER the corporations in its midst; (3) exploring the possibilities behind a municipal ordinance that defines the basis on which corporations can set up shop in that community; or (4) working on ways to remove encroaching, co-opting corporations from the local public school system.

The IMPORTANT question is HOW we do this work?RADICALLY.

This proposal acknowledges that we are NOT succeeding in stopping the damage corporations impose by doing what we've been doing — trying to regulate, reform, make more responsible or better behaving these institutions we created to serve us, institutions that have become pathologies in the body politic.

The proposal responds to the need for a NEW understanding of history, one that reveals the corporate usurpations of governing authority occurring in this country over the last 150 years.

It addresses our need to grasp more deeply the toxic impact of these corporate entities on our capacities to BE democratic, on the trust, process, skills, even the time we the people need to DO democracy, to carry out the rights and responsibilities necessary for our own governance.

This proposal operates out of a framework for learning and language, for strategies and action that seeks a change in the NATURE of economic institutions to one that puts them in appropriate relationship to the people, that of subservience.

There are several key truths that anchor this framework. They relate to what corporations are and what they are not:

- The corporation is NOT a person ...it is a THING, a legal construct. Yet it was declared a person by a Supreme Court under corporate control in 1886.
- The corporation is NOT private property. Created by the public to serve the public, it does not become a private entity upon that creation but should remain under public DEFINING, not regulating, powers.
- The corporation does NOT have rights. It has only privileges which we the people gave it and we the people can take away. PEOPLE have rights, and it is WE who are responsible to one another for the performance of our corporate creations.

While this is a large and long task, it is NOT undoable. Rule by corporations is neither inevitable nor irreversible, but we must, as WILPF so well knows, work to pull out the ROOTS of this pathological engine driving the corporate-capitalist economy.

WILPF is well placed to help kick such a people's movement into gear through its branches at the grassroots.