



MOVE TO AMEND

Why We Need a Democracy Movement

By Move to Amend National Leadership Team, 2012

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In 2008, the world watched as the planet's mightiest financial institutions threw up their hands and fell to their knees, triggering a domino effect that devastated the global economy. After decades of extorting its fortunes off the backs of workers, the scope of Wall Street's treachery became clear. Corporate power and government had become synonymous, the only difference being that the latter now existed to serve the former. Forget about the revolving door, now everyone worked in the same building in a quaint corporate office park called Capitol Hill.

Outraged Americans did what we were taught to do in our high school civics class: we called our legislators. The idea went like this: We lived in a representative democracy. Therefore, our representatives were supposed to, well, represent us. If they heard from us, they'd speak for us. Or so the formula went.

And oh, they heard from us! For days on end every phone line within squawking distance of a marble building in DC was jammed with angry callers demanding the breakup of the major banks. It was one of the most successful, if uncoordinated, mass call-ins that Washington has witnessed in its lifetime.

Yet only days later, under emergency cover, both houses of Congress voted overwhelmingly for a \$700 billion dollar bailout of the very banks that had crashed our economy.

The message was clear. The magic formula had failed. The people did not matter. There was a better formula out there namely, the \$4 billion that would be poured into the 2010 election cycle to pay for more of the same legislation in the future. The United States had a democracy in name only; in practice it was a well-funded corporate racket.

Now the airwaves were flooded with the same voices that had jammed the phone lines in Congress. Many were shocked. How could their government do this to them?

But many people were not.

Single payer health care activists weren't shocked. Despite the fact that 64 percent of Americans wanted a national health insurance program, millions of dollars of insurance industry cash had ensured that conversations about structural change would be off the table. And as insurers like AIG received \$85 billion in corporate bailouts, the story was about to get much worse. By the same time next year, under what was ostensibly the most progressive presidency

in decades, 46 million Americans would have absolutely no access to basic care, and 45,000 would die healthcare related deaths. This was not an abstraction. It meant something very real: if you were poor and sick in the United States, you went bankrupt or you died. Nevertheless, President Obama cozied up to insurance corporations and passed a healthcare plan that cost the country \$1 trillion dollars in just ten years and kept the corporations at the head of the table.

Peace activists weren't shocked, either. After mounting resistance to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to the tune of millions in the streets, 60% of Americans wanted the US out of the Middle East yesterday. But their movement had been eviscerated by a corporate media kept cash-flush to convince the average American that \$39.5 billion in Halliburton war profits was the same thing as democracy in the Arab world.

There were other people who were not surprised.

The 1.32 million people of color locked up in prisons, many of them run for profit, were not surprised.

The 350,000 immigrants who had been ripped away from their families and sent to detention facilities, many of them also private, before being sent to countries on the shadow side of a \$2.4 billion border wall, were similarly not surprised.

The Native Americans who had seen their lands taken from them at gunpoint, and then at lawpoint, first by settlers and then by the dams, pipelines, coal plants and uranium mines that these settlers came to control, could not have been surprised.

That's because these groups of people had long ago learned two things: that a dollar matters more than a person and the government serves the dollar, not the people.

For these people, the rest of the country's shock at democracy's failure must have rung quite hollow, if only because they'd never enjoyed the privilege of believing that democracy was working in the first place.

After all, these were the same people the Founding Fathers had done their damndest to keep out of the Constitution the first time around. They were the actual or cultural descendants of the 95% percent of people--slaves, women, debtors, farmers, dissidents and boat rockers--who were considered too dangerous to the interests of property and wealth to be given the protection of rights in a document created to secure the same.

On this point the Founders were perfectly clear: The Constitutional Convention had been called to squelch the dangers of too much democracy. Its purpose was to facilitate the transition from a government led by a man ruled by God, the king, to a government led by a few men ruled by the dollar, the merchants. Its chief aim, therefore, was to create a political system that protected property from the irrational impulses of the rabble, people who were using the Revolution to

argue for the eradication of debt, the equitable distribution of land, and a popular system of government by assembly.

Who and What the Constitution Serves

Nowhere in this great “democratic” deliberation was the word democracy actually used, except as a specter or pejorative. A scan of the great founding democratic document of our time also turns up nothing: the word democracy is never mentioned. In fact, it was only because the rabble saw so clearly that the Constitution was a document designed to protect wealth that we now enjoy the basic protection of a Bill of Rights, compromises agreed to in the rush for ratification.

It is the first three words of the Constitution and the ten amendments in the Bill of Rights that we can assume those people surprised by the bank bailouts of 2008 were counting on. We the People had spoken, had assembled, had used the press, had pulled out all the stops in our fight against a steady descent into corporatism, and we had been trounced. Thoroughly.

For the first time, middle class America had to know what the rest of the country had known since day one: that the government did not protect people, it protected profit; that we did not have a democracy, but a plutocracy.

The whole experience had brought up the essential question of democracy: who has power?

All this happened more than a year before the day that the Supreme Court used the Citizens United case to reaffirm that the corporation, the same entity that had consolidated 42% of the country’s wealth in the hands of the wealthiest 1%, the same entity that had played pretend with people’s savings and tanked the world economy, has the rights of human beings.

For anyone who had any doubt remaining, there it was in the starker terms: if before the Constitution had existed to serve people with property, now property itself had become a person.

And that’s where Move to Amend came in. For more than two decades, the people who launched Move to Amend had been fighting in our local communities to make the connection between corporate rights and corporate rule. We were determined to make that connection because we had seen all our previous struggles, whether for clean air or real wages or a livable planet, backed up against the same brick wall: the wall of corporate power. If we were going to win our immediate goals, we’d have to strike at the root.

But how do you defeat corporate power when corporate power is both everything and everywhere? You can’t.

So we picked a battle. We knew that corporate personhood and money in politics were two of the most damaging, and damning examples of the corporate takeover of our government and lives. Corporate personhood provokes all the questions we want people to ask. It combines the quintessentially American tradition of people's demand for personhood and the fundamental problem of corporate power. It links the anti-corporate and the anti-monarchical elements of the American Revolution and makes the connection between political and economic oppression. It engages the American Revolution in both a critical and inspirational light, telling a people's history of the fight for self governance in spite of the power of the wealthy. It combines the recognition that we need sweeping system change with the ability to use one aspect of that system, the amendment process, to create that change itself. Most importantly, it allows us to make common cause with all the groups that were left out of "We the People" the first time around, as well as draw the connections between the diverse movements struggling against corporate control in one form or another. Corporate "personhood" (or corporate constitutional rights) allows us to unite against powerful entities: giant business corporations. The rallying vision for all would be that of democracy. Democracy is the power of everyone to participate in making the decisions that shape public life. Addressing corporate constitutional rights helps us pose the questions: What should our world look like? Who should decide?

Move to Amend's vision and Work

Move to Amend's goal was never simply an amendment abolishing corporate "personhood" and money as speech. Nor do we seek a reversal of the 2010 *Citizens United* decision. In fact, the bailouts discussed at the start of this essay and the many powers granted to corporations over property, commerce and governance were in place well before the *Citizens United* case came before the Supreme Court. We weren't in charge of our democracy before 2010 and we won't be in the future if all we do is repeal that decision.

The problem is much deeper. What we are seeing now is the consequence of centuries of elite rule, a regime that was predicated on a throwaway class of people who would work so the few could make money. We are seeing even now the consequences of a Constitution that excluded 95 percent of the population from the basic right to be counted as a human being.

Is it enough, then, to amend the Constitution and ignore the other elements of corporate rule? To talk about democracy as if it were something to restore or reform, and be done with it?

The answer to both questions is no.

Our job is more sweeping. Our job is to build a movement large enough and bold enough to recognize and repair the damage wrought by a small group of people that for centuries have controlled and misused others for profit, and then not to rest, but to continue imagining and creating the world we want to see.

This can only be accomplished by committing to some core beliefs.

We must recognize that democracy is not an institution, it is a practice of radical self respect, creativity, and collaboration that, when done well, dramatically impacts our institutions. In this sense, democracy has never been “invented.” It has existed whenever people made a decision together or stood up for a belief against the wishes of the powerful. In the American Revolution, thousands of unnamed people exercised this self respect and mutual decision-making until it changed the culture and tore down a system of monarchy with all the rules, rituals, and logic that held it in place. We must believe that ordinary people have the experience, knowledge and collective intelligence to resolve the problems facing them. We must believe this despite a corporate coup over the centuries that has been both institutional and psychological. We’ve had to shrink our perception of democratic rights, draw a boundary on what we see as politically possible.

Can we admit that the United States has never been a real democracy? Can we be honest about our country’s beginnings, both good and bad, and see that history as a series of revolutions and counter revolutions between the wealthy and the oppressed? Can we accept that our Constitution, for all of its lofty wording, is actually a document that used the law to transfer wealth and power from the mass of people to an elite few, and that the sentiments in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights are the mere echoes of those who wanted the Revolution to be so much bigger than it was? These are unfinished documents. It is up to us to expand on them.

We must level with ourselves about the notion that democracy is something to be restored. We must do this out of honesty and respect for the millions of our brothers and sisters who were never counted, never protected by “democracy,” from the beginning. There is no democratic “moment” in our country’s history, there are only moments when people who didn’t count recognized that fact and refused to accept it, when they built social movements to force the powerful to see them for who they were: human beings. We must practice seeing ourselves as part of a long march of people who have amended that document and demanded that we rethink our ideas about who is worthy and needing inclusion. Like these trailblazers, can we now ask whether the Constitution really serves democracy and make the changes that will make self-governance possible?

Because power is about who controls, we must acknowledge how the powerful have operated in this country and what some among us have always had to know. Those of us who’ve been protected from this understanding of power must dare to see its consequences: poverty, incarceration, and policing fed by a centuries old addiction to African enslavement; see the body hatred, domestic violence, and cycles of abuse that grow out of millenia of men owning and dominating women; see the mass movement of peoples whose land and livelihoods were taken from them by the soldiers and footmen of capital; see the indigenous who have been siloed and murdered to feed a colonizer culture obsessed with growth. And if we are one of those people who do not have to know how power works, do not have to carry it on our skin or our backs or

our bodies, we must ask the people who carry it what they know. If we don't, how can we know what we're up against, whom our foes are, and what the struggle is for? And if we can't know this, how can we win?

Building a Democracy Movement

If we make these things a practice, we will build a movement--a democracy movement. Like the powerful movements that have gone before: the women's rights movement, the abolitionist movement, the Populist movement, and the American Indian Movement, we will be questioning an elaborate system of violence, violence that has become normalized, just the way things are. We will expose that violence. We will ask why we have organized our political and economic system around the idea that the dollar is more important than a person. We will question why the corporation--that great concentrator of capital and purveyor of colonialism and violence--is the centerpiece of that system. We will ask why the very small handful of people who are in charge of corporations get to make every decision that affects our lives, from the quality of air we breathe to the jobs we perform, from when and where we go to war to the look of our future on this planet. And we will begin to see this system not as the way things are, but as the way things were consciously and deliberately established by those in power. And we will learn that if things can be created, they can be taken apart. We will feel the first inklings of our own, radical self-respect returning, and we will say: we can do better than this. We can build a world that does not divide and poison and harm us and one another. We've rarely had the chance to prove what's possible. We are creating that chance now.

Because this is what movements do, we see that movements are not merely campaigns or single actions or plans for reform. Movements question and then reorder our basic assumptions about the world. They orient us toward justice. They see political resistance as an ecological system in which everyone has a niche, everyone is connected and necessary to the working of the whole. Movements name the forces to oppose and find common goals. They work with the advantages that diversity brings. They realize that to change reality we have to change behavior and to change behavior we have to change structures. Right now we live in a structure in which the law, the rules and the culture require us to act like sociopaths, disregarding the humanity of others for our own gain. This cannot be reformed. If the Dalai Lama himself ran WalMart, he could act no differently than the current CEO. In existing systems, the rules run us, we do not run the rules.

So we have to change the rules.

This is what the We the People Amendment is about: changing very important rules that allow corporations to run our lives and plunder the Earth. But those are just a few laws in a labyrinthine system that defends the powerful against the powerless. And so we have to go

further. We have to remember what some of us have always had to know. We have to ask everyone who is fighting for a better world: what does that look like, and what prevents us from turning it into reality? And then we must go still further, because we are not merely fighting *against* corporate rule, we are fighting *for* democracy. So we'd also have to ask what rules, cultures, institutions, and alternatives would shape a world you want to see? Our work does not end with abolishing corporate "personhood" but in bringing justice, by which we mean liberation from a system that divides and destroys in the name of the dollar to one that resists and rebuilds in the name of democracy.

That's a big goal. So was the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women, and the creation of a worldwide worker solidarity economy. People chose to bear the risks of seeking those goals. The abolition movement chose to take on slavery, not just the most deeply embedded and organized form of racialized hate at the time, but the pivot of the entire political and industrial economy. They knew what they were demanding. You can't end slavery without toppling the entire structure of political, economic and social power. But they did it. Women suffragettes were asking for a total overhaul of the political, economic and social order. They were turning the definition of property on its head. They were troubling decision-making power at its root. They were demanding full participation in meaningful work, both the work of democracy and the right to their own livelihoods. But they did it. And labor organizers living in the greatest economic depression this country has ever known were resisting the call of the bosses to hate other workers, to compete, to get their own and go home. They were hungry and desperate but still they refused. Instead, they imagined and fought for a world in which workers united for the benefit of everyone and made decisions about who and what the economy was for. If you grew up expecting eight-hour work days with bathroom breaks and a safe environment, thank a radical labor organizer.

All of these movements had campaigns and tactics. The women's movement of the 19th century worked for a suffrage amendment. As a result, we often call their movement Women's Suffrage. But was the goal of the women's movement simply the right to vote? Would the right to vote alone erase the fact that for centuries they were legally the property of their fathers and husbands? Would it tidily resolve the deep, dogged cultural belief that they were weak, silly and inferior? Was the right to vote alone worth 75 years of organizing? Picketing day after day at the gates of the White House? Being spit on and reviled? Enduring hunger strikes and forced feedings? They did all those things because they sought *more* than the right to vote.

The goal of the women's movement was simple and profound: full equality for women. They used the amendment to convince masses of Americans to reconsider who women were, what they were worth, and what they were for.

What about the abolition movement? Was their goal simply to end the worst forms of plantation slavery? For some of them--particularly white abolitionists--yes. But for many abolitionists, white and black, they were in it for the deeper questions: Who counts as human? What would an economic and political system look like that was not based on abject suffering for some? The

abolitionist movement, especially as it morphed into Reconstruction-era organizing and, ultimately, the Civil Rights movement, was about something well beyond slavery: it was about full racial equality. The abolitionists also used amendments, but the amendments were not the end of their organizing. Amendments allowed them to call into question a legal system designed to protect whiteness, wealth and property. Amendments allowed them to start a conversation that grew into the Underground Railroad, Emigrant Aid Societies, slave uprisings, the Wide Awakes, and the birth of a radical Republican party.

As 21st century Americans, we are the inheritors of this work. We survive because of the legal inheritance of these movements, yes, but we thrive as a result of the cultural inheritances they bequeathed to us. We do not just live in a world where women can vote, but where the whole concept of who women are has changed, where millions of young girls consider it obvious that they should be treated equally and with respect. But what is obvious now was impossible then. It's only obvious because those who have gone before made it so.

Challenges for the Future

Did these movements succeed? Have we achieved full racial, gender and economic equality? No. The movement never ends, which is why it's called a movement. Each generation picks up where the last one left off, pushing it further, asking new questions, articulating current realities that must be countered and new realities that must be achieved. We do the work. We do it everyday. That, if anything, is the definition of democracy.

And now for us, Move to Amend. Is our goal an amendment to the Constitution to end corporate personhood? No. Our goal is democracy, economic and political democracy. Our goal is a world in which people possess the most basic human powers: the power to decide, the power to collaborate equitably with others to address the problems we face. We ask: Do we exist for the economy or does the economy exist for us? We say it exists for us, and we should define and design it. And we believe something that self-respecting people throughout history have always believed: that together we can create economic and political systems that do not depend on violence, exclusion and hierarchy. We are working for an amendment that would initiate a conversation across race, class, gender, and issues about the world we want to see. The amendment is at the foundation of that new world.

We create a movement so we're too big to crush. We work across issues to make change material. We work amongst difference so we cannot be divided. We work to win.

As in the past, people well meaning people will tell us to rein it in. They will tell us to speak more softly, to hide uncomfortable truths. They will tell us to be realistic, take baby steps, win over the politicians. They will ask us to speak and act and look like those in power because that is the way they believe power hears.

And we will say no, not because we are obstinate or pure, but because we know how change occurs. Big, bold, earthshaking change comes from speaking the words that those in power don't want you to say. It does not come from persuasion, it comes from demand. It does not convince everybody, it organizes among the people who know what's going on. It creates a gravity out of its own moral weight that draws the world to its orbit. Major change results from organizing with vision and persistence across difference, with the belief that many are ready. We will know we are successful when people in the future think our big, bold ideas are not big and bold, but obvious and inevitable--when they wonder what took us so long to figure it out.

There will be other people, too, not at all well meaning, who will be terrified at our plans. They will try to divide our movement in the oldest and most cynical ways possible. They will divide us on race, on class, over gender and geography. They will tell us we have nothing in common, and only some of us can win. They will convince us of scarcity, since that is what their world runs on, and say we can't have what we want. They will try to make us feel small so we will act small, politically and toward each other. They will convince us to focus on legality, not liberation.

They have done it before. They did it to the LGBTQ movement, which was sparked by transgender people who were organizing "all the oppressed" in a vast movement for justice. Within years, the same transgender activists who had built the movement were shut out of gay pride marches. Lesbians, who had cared for their gay friends with AIDS, were also ostracized by a gay-dominated movement. The emphasis shifted from difference to assimilation, which meant that everyone different had to go back in the closet. After this, it was easy to split the movement strategically, focusing on civil issues like marriage equality instead of homelessness, discrimination and violence. The opportunity to redefine gender, family and the economy took a backseat to an increasingly corporatized campaign for sameness. A movement that could have worked on myriad issues of gender equality using myriad cultural and political tools turned into a movement in which basic needs were pitted against civil rights, and the realities of the poor and the different were upstaged by the concerns of the wealthy and the acceptable.

Or take the women's suffrage movement, which began as an outgrowth of the Anti-slavery Movement, recognizing that oppressions of women and Black people were connected and had to be fought together. The movement split, however, when male abolitionists refused to acknowledge the validity of women's rights and worked to splinter the two groups. It worked, and the women's movement imploded, with some adherents supporting abolitionists at the cost of their equality and others defecting from the Republican party to join pro-slavery racists as long as they supported women. As a result, both the abolitionist and women's causes were weakened and undermined. This damaged the Reconstruction efforts in the South and reduced the women's rights movement to a narrowed focus on suffrage, which was itself delayed decades because of feuds over abolitionist and suffragist priorities.

If we build a movement that truly challenges corporate rule, we will become the targets of the most well funded, well organized and powerful financial hydra the world has ever seen. This hydra will fight back, on multiple fronts and with everything it's got. Unless we explicitly organize

across race, class, and gender, the hydra will convince us to fight for ourselves and forget about the other. If we fail to organize across issues and with a common vision, it will succeed in driving us to lesser goals. We will lose an incredible opportunity to redefine the meaning of power and to redefine our economics and politics with humanity in mind.

So we build a movement. We start with the people who know what's going on based on their daily experience. We organize with people who know how power works and that corporate power is just another means for protecting profit over people. We fight against private prisons, deportations, food deserts, poverty wages, police brutality, environmental racism, climate destruction. And we do this knowing one thing is in our favor: if there are elites, then there are the masses, and if we're the masses, then we're massive. There are more of us than there are of them. We do not need to run to them and convince them to join us. We organize until they have to join us. We practice a politics that reflects the world we want to see. If we seek justice, we work with people who seek justice. If we want equity, we practice equity. If we want a different world, we don't wait to get started. We begin.

And then we win.