

Winter 2021

## Targeting the corporate puppet masters: seizing this moment to make progressive progress under Biden

Dear friend,

As laughter and music filled my parents' festive living room, I buried my face against my grandfather's shoulder and sobbed. It was New Year's Eve. I was devastated that 1976 had to come to an end.

My hometown had spent all year celebrating the bicentennial: the 200th anniversary of the U.S.'s founding. Philadelphia decked itself out in parades, parties, and major league all-star games. I was proud that the principles of liberty, equality, and government by representation were enshrined into the Constitution in Philly—even though my five-year-old brain had only the foggiest concept of what that meant. On December 31, I couldn't believe the magical year was over. I cried in Pop Pop's arms until we both fell asleep in the easy chair among the festivities.

More than four decades later, I celebrated the end of 2020 not with tears but with a night of reflection. I named and honored the painful ways this year shone a bright spotlight on the racist, inequitable power structures baked into the founding of the U.S. and the attendant harm caused to people globally and within its borders.

No longer the five-year-old who loved her city and country without question, I reflected on what I believe is possible for the years ahead and what it will take to get there. I thought about our shared work at Corporate Accountability to transform the power structures of this country. I imagined better ways to live into our values of care, justice, and equity.

Just a few days later, the Georgia senate elections and the attack on the Capitol dramatically shifted the national political landscape. Black organizers and voters once again led the way in delivering crucial victories for the both the Democratic Party and U.S. democracy. And the violence at the Capitol was a shocking, but not surprising, consequence of four years of blistering assault on our democracy by Trump and his enablers in both the public and private sector.

As we have seen, those 48 hours proved pivotal in what the Biden administration can accomplish. Today, the progressive movement has both the opportunity and moral imperative to demand that the White

House and Congress take full advantage of the power they have. We must hold them accountable to the communities that got them in office: Black and Indigenous people, people of color, women, and working people. Over the next four years, through our mission and campaigns challenging corporate power, Corporate Accountability has a key role to play in keeping the bar high and advancing progress.

## Challenging corporate power is key to achieving a progressive agenda

In the forty-plus years since this country and I celebrated its founding, corporate-driven forces have systematically weakened both the people's faith in, and the actual effectiveness of government. Both Republicans and Democrats have advanced the ideology of putting the market and corporate profits above all else, while using racist dog whistles to distract people from the harm this ideology causes to everyone but a handful of mostly white people. Trump took this approach to the next level.



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It's true that Biden ran on a platform that, to a degree, addressed the flaws of this economic and political system designed to benefit a handful of mega-wealthy, powerful, and mostly white people at the expense of everyone else. But one of Biden's top advisors during his presidential campaign was his former chief-of-staff, Bruce Reed, who played a major role in the 1990s in pushing the Democratic Party toward neoliberal economic policy. And in reviewing Biden's 50 years in politics, we can see that his policies and ideologies often favor corporations and corporate power at the expense of the very communities that ensured his win.

The challenges that our leaders face today are real—the pandemic, the economic slowdown, the ongoing threat of violent white nationalists. Nevertheless, Democrats have control of the Senate, the House, and the White House. So, as Roxane Gay wrote in *The New York Times*, "With the power they hold, Democrats can try to make this country a more equitable and generous place rather than one where the interest of the very wealthy and powerful are the priority." It is up to us, the progressive movement, to pressure them to do just that.

We can do so by focusing not only on the politicians themselves, but, as importantly, on the corporate players pushing their agenda. When we are able to impact the bottom line of the corporations pulling the strings of those who have sworn to represent us, we are able to create powerful and meaningful change.

We've seen this work in the past. The massive labor strikes of the 1930s threatened to ground the economy to a halt—giving corporations and politicians little choice but to cede to the labor movement's demands. The civil rights movement in the 1960s organized boycotts, sit-ins, and other tactics that caused economic disruption in the South. Political scholar Kevin Young argues that this was the factor driving President Kennedy to send the civil rights bill to Congress.

Today, we must organize on all fronts to transform the dire and interlocking issues we face: structural racism, the climate crisis, wealth inequality, public health crises, and more. Because corporations exploit, profit from, and are at the root of these complex problems, we must take on corporate power with all the force we have. If we don't, the most basic problems of inequity of power and injustice will continue.

### The progressive movement is ready

I believe we are ready for this moment. Under the Trump years we saw a flourishing of progressive movements, organizers, thinkers, and cultures. In the face of tremendous pain, people targeted and harmed by Trump's assaults organized in beautiful new ways.



Illustration credit: Kah Yangni

The progressive movement came together like we haven't in a long time. Together, we rose up for Black lives, organized against the Muslim ban, fought family separation policies and other attacks on immigrants, and defended the Affordable Care Act. This is the movement that ultimately defeated Trump. Black and Indigenous people and people of color, immigrants, youth, people with disabilities, women, and LGBTQIA+ people led the way, with Black women out in front. They demonstrated what multi-racial, multi-issue organizing looks like. We all got a glimpse of what's possible when we organize to address the roots of this country's deepest problems, not just the symptoms.

Now, it's all of our responsibility to keep building on this power and possibility. In this large and vibrant movement, we each have a role to play as individuals and as organizations. We can continue to work together as a whole movement to advance a progressive agenda—not only at the federal level, but in our communities, cities, and states as well. And we can also ensure that we are looking beyond our borders to play a respectful and supportive role in global progressive movements.

### We know our lane, and we're ready

Our role in this movement is clear: Corporate Accountability takes on corporate power with members like you. Since the mid 1970s, we have been successfully challenging transnational corporations, impacting their bottom line, and holding them accountable.

But we also know that we have a lot to learn and a lot to unlearn. As an organization that's historically been led by white people and based in the U.S., we are working to transform ourselves so we can show up well in the progressive movement. We are working on race equity as both individuals and as an organization. We're engaging our heads and our hearts, knowing it requires vulnerability and courage from all of us: staff, board, and members. Specifically, we are working to create explicitly anti-racist and feminist leadership, policies, and organizational culture.

Doing this work allows us to better play our part in holding this administration accountable to the people who ensured their victory.

**Together, we can be part of a powerful movement that takes on corporate interest, challenges corporations, and makes it too hard for the Biden administration to ignore the demands of the people who secured his victory.**



And we're already knee-deep in organizing to that end. For example, we and our allies have called on the administration to end electricity, water, and broadband shut-offs during and following the pandemic. We are partnering with communities in the Gulf Coast to support the Gulf South for a Green New Deal. We are organizing with front-line communities around the country and the world to make Big Polluters pay for their role in the climate crisis.

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And, in so doing, we will be part of helping clear the way for progressive changes that will benefit everyone and create a better future for all. Like healthcare for everyone, clean water at rates everyone can afford, a just transition away from a fossil-fuel economy, and more. Such changes would help create a country that my five-year-old self would recognize as one she believed in, was proud of, and would want her beloved city to throw a party for.



Onward,

**PATTI LYNN | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



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