

Ground Rules & Tips for Challenging the Right

Do Your Homework

- **Recognize that the Right is a complex movement.**

No one organization “controls” the Right. No single funder is “behind” the Right. Some large organizations are important, but many others appear to be more influential than they really are. Recognize that there are multiple networks of organizations and funders with differing and sometimes competing agendas. Find out as much as you can about the groups you see. Incorporate this information in your educational work. It is helpful in organizing to know a great deal about your opponents. Be alert to evidence of the Right’s “new racism.” The Right has replaced simple racist rhetoric with a more complex, “colorblind” political agenda which actually attacks the rights of people of color. See the Resources sections of this kit for some assistance in your research.

- **Decode the Right’s agenda on your issue.**

The Right often attempts to pass laws that take rights away from groups or individuals. Under the guise of addressing some compelling societal need, they often frame the issue by appealing to prejudice, myth, irrational belief, inaccurate information, pseudo-science, or sometimes even by using outright lies. Further, right-wing organizers often appropriate the rhetoric of the civil rights and civil liberties movement to portray themselves as victims of discrimination. Actually, they most often are seeking to undermine the existing protection of individual rights, increase their freedom to accumulate profit, and undermine the wall of separation between church and state.

- **Be careful to respect people’s right to hold opinions and religious beliefs that you may find offensive.**

Everyone has an absolute right to seek redress of their grievances. This is equally true when those grievances are based on religious beliefs. In an open and democratic society, it is important to listen to the grievances of *all* members of society and take them seriously, even when we might be vehemently opposed to them. They do not, however, have a right to impose those beliefs on others.

- **Distinguish between leaders and followers in right-wing organizations.**

Leaders are often “professional” right-wingers. They’ve made a career of promoting a rightist agenda and attacking progressives and progressive issues. Followers, on the other hand, may not be well-informed. They are often mobilized by fears about family and future based on information that, if true, would indeed be frightening. This so-called “education” is often skillful, deceitful, and convincing. These followers may take positions that are more extreme than those of the leaders, but on the other hand, they may not know exactly what they are supporting by attending a certain organization’s rally or conference. To critique and expose the leaders of right-wing organizations is the work of a good progressive organizer, writer or activist. In the case of the followers, however, it is important to reserve judgment and listen to their grievances. Do not assume that they are all sophisticated political agents or have access to a variety of information sources.

- **Rebut, Rebuke, Reaffirm.**

It’s important to remember that while the tactics of the Right may be obvious to you, they are not necessarily obvious to others, even though they might be part of the political process. The ways in which the Right distorts and misleads the public must be carefully explained. Use a 3-step process. Rebut false and inaccurate claims. Rebuke those who use scapegoating or demagoguery. Reaffirm what a progressive goal or agenda would accomplish for the betterment of society.

Stay Cool in Public

- **Use the opportunity of public forums to present your position.**

Approach any public event as a chance to state your case. Come fully prepared to explain why you are right. Although your audience may be unfriendly, remember that you are often an invited guest at such events. Audience members are expecting you to represent your group, even though they may not expect to agree with you. Your task is to convince these listeners, not the representatives of the Right who may be your debating opponents or fellow panelists. Do so using short, clear sentences, not long, abstract paragraphs. Many audience members are your potential supporters, available to join your ranks. Provide them with reasons and ways to do so.

- **Demand documentation.**

Common tactics of the Right include distorting the truth and manipulating facts and figures in order to deceive the public. You can often expose false charges and baseless claims by demanding that their sources be cited. The leadership of an organization can and must be held fully responsible for every spoken or written word that comes from him or her or the organization they represent. If you are thoroughly prepared, you will know the weaknesses of these sources and be able to refute them publicly. At the same time be prepared to document your sources in order to maintain your credibility.

- **Address the issues, not just the actors.**

Try to avoid personalizing the debate or focusing entirely on the presentation by the Right's representative. Take time to clarify what the real issues are, what tactics are being used, why these issues are important to the Right and what the implications of the debate might be.

- **Criticize the outcomes, not the intent, of the Right's agenda.**

If you focus only on exposing the purpose of a particular campaign, you may find yourself locked in a circular argument about who knows better what the Right seeks to accomplish. It may be more productive to look at the implications of the issues at hand and to explain that the logical outcome of adopting your opponent's position will be a serious threat to the goals of your group.

- **Avoid slogans, namecalling, and demonizing members of the Right.**

Slogans and sound bites have their place, but they are not sufficient as an organizing strategy. Simple anti-Right slogans do not help people understand why the Right sounds convincing but is wrong. And responding in kind to being called names weakens your position with some of the listeners you are trying to convince. Phrases like "religious political extremists" are labels, not arguments, and often will backfire on the neighborhood and community level.

- **Expose who benefits from right-wing campaigns.**

One of the most common ways the Right advances its policies is to argue that they will benefit the "average" person, though that most often is not the case. It helps in exposing this deception to point out who actually stands to benefit and who stands to lose from the policy being proposed. Exploring whose self-interest is served can help organizers as they seek a clearer picture of the forces behind a particular campaign. Sometimes, the greatest beneficiaries of a right-wing campaign are the organizations conducting it. Campaigns are recruitment tools. So if potential new members can be reached by a certain position, that is sometimes in and of itself the reason the campaign is mounted.

Keep Organizing

- **Keep your supporters informed.**

Signing up supporters is a good start, but your job includes keeping your supporters well informed. Often the Right will switch tactics or redirect its energy. If you are in the middle of an attack, these changes may be puzzling. Keep in mind that the deep agenda of the Right remains unchanged despite these apparent shifts. Persist in explaining this to your colleagues.

- **Involve clergy and other respected community members in your organizing.**

Since so much of the Right's rhetoric has been influenced by the Religious Right, progressive, faith-based organizations and their representatives have great potential for increasing your chances for successful organizing. Sympathetic religious leaders can present an alternative interpretation of scripture and often have access to large congregations who may be interested in your work.

- **Be patient.**

Change takes time. Your organizing today is laying the groundwork for tomorrow's successes. Patience, optimism and a sense of humor are key ingredients in opposing the Right.