The Art of Protest
Political Posters and Graphics of Dissent
CAROL A. WELLS

There has never been a movement for social change without arts—music, poetry, theater, posters—being central to that movement. Political posters in particular are powerful reminders of struggles worldwide for peace and justice. Revolutions produce posters, as in Russia, China, Cuba, and Nicaragua. Anti-colonial, anti-Apartheid, and reunification struggles produce posters, as in Viet Nam, southern Africa, the Middle East, and Korea. Civil wars produce posters, as in Spain and El Salvador. Military dictatorships generate posters, as in Guatemala, Chile and Indonesia. Solidarity and anti-intervention movements from Australia to Japan, from Europe to the US, all produce posters. The list goes on. It reveals tremendous suffering, but also resistance and hope. It also demonstrates the international importance of the political poster.

The Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) collects and exhibits posters relating to historical and contemporary movements for peace and social justice. It is the only activist archive in the US, and one of the largest and most diverse collections in the world. Founded in 1988, the archive grew out of a 1981 exhibition opposing US intervention in Central America. It grew quickly, as activists from many movements began donating their treasured posters—many saved under beds, in closets or worse, in leaky basements or garages—so that new generations would see them. The archive currently contains approximately 50,000 domestic and international posters, dating from the Russian Revolution to the present. CSPG’s rapidly growing collection records the dreams and struggles of people who fought—and continue to fight—for social justice. To make the collection even more accessible, virtual exhibitions will soon be available.

Protest posters are the graphics of dissent. They protest injustices, announce demonstrations, honor heroes and martyrs, and commemorate significant events. Despite the extraordinary ability of the Internet to mobilize thousands locally and millions internationally, neither computers nor web access are available to everyone. At the risk of stating the obvious, a computer terminal cannot be carried in a demonstration, pinned to a bulletin board, stuck into a lawn, or placed against a window for the world, communities and neighbors to see.

Yet despite their prevalence and the fact they are produced in multiples—offset, lithograph, silkscreen, linocut, stencil, woodcut, photocopy, laser, or digital output—few copies of protest posters survive. They are destroyed by those who disagree with the messages, but also by those who agree. Causes change, events are over, new issues arise. Old posters are often recycled into notepaper or simply discarded. CSPG collects these irreplaceable graphics and is committed to preserving and widely exhibiting them through traveling theme-based exhibitions. These exhibitions present perspectives not recorded by the corporate media, and show a history rarely taught in school: Ours.

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Show and Tell

CSPG’s timely traveling poster exhibitions are a unique resource for organizers and educators. All exhibitions are presented from multi-issue and multicultural perspectives and come mounted and accompanied by translations and other educational materials. The exhibitions illuminate and broaden understanding of diverse human-rights issues (Native American and Women’s rights, anti-Semitism, immigration) and movements past and present (Black Panther Party, AIDS activism, gentrification and homelessness).

For example, CSPG produced major exhibitions opposing the first and current Gulf Wars, using posters to illustrate over 30 US interventions since World War II. “The Anti-War Show: US Interventions Since WWII” opened during January 2003, just weeks before US forces began bombing Iraq, and included powerful political posters accompanied by informative text. The exhibition included perhaps the most powerful and influential poster against the Viet Nam War: “Q: And Babies? A: And Babies.” It showed in full color some of the hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians from the village of My Lai who were massacred by the US military. Ron Haeberle’s photo was reproduced in the mainstream press and in this widely disseminated poster.

Public knowledge of the My Lai Massacre—which had been suppressed for more than a year by the US government—marked a turning point in the country’s acceptance of the war. More than 30 years later, this poster and accompanying description of the incident, serve as a graphic reminder of what US intervention means, particularly for those people under 40 who had no knowledge of this atrocity.

CSPG has organized more than two dozen different exhibitions that travel to universities, museums, galleries, libraries, community centers, schools, religious institutions, concert halls, theaters, and union halls. These exhibitions are frequently incorporated into grassroots organizing campaigns and university curricula. Using graphics that are historic and current, domestic and international, these exhibitions show the history and breadth of specific struggles, and how activists from other times and places have handled similar issues. They break down isolation, letting viewers know they are not alone in opposing Bush, supporting a cleaner environment, or wanting prison reform.

Protest Art Helps Make Connections

Posters challenge people’s assumptions and understanding by linking issues often seen as unrelated. For example, political posters demonstrate that the Black Panther Party organized for the United Farm Workers; that Cesar Chavez and Huey Newton supported gay and lesbian rights; that many Israelis oppose the Occupation; and that despite the corporate press, many millions of US citizens continue to oppose the current war against Iraq. Posters grab viewers’ attention through bold images and striking designs to broadcast their diverse messages. They can deepen compassion and commitment, ignite outrage, elicit laughter, and provoke action.

Poster donations enable the archive to represent many issues past and present, and help causes be known nationally and internationally. If you know people who have posters they might be willing to donate, please let us know. Help reclaim the power of art to agitate, educate and inspire people to action.

Carol A. Wells is the executive director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, a former RESIST grantee. For more information, please contact CSPG,

8124 West Third Street, Ste. #211, Los Angeles, CA 90048-4309; cspg@politicalgraphics.org; www.politicalgraphics.org.

Photo by Ron Haeberle; Poster by Jon Hendricks, Irving Petlin, Frazier Dougherty, Art Workers Coalition, New York, 1969-70

8124 West Third Street, Ste. #211, Los Angeles, CA 90048-4309; cspg@politicalgraphics.org; www.politicalgraphics.org.

For information and grant guidelines, write to: RESIST, 259 Elm St., Suite 201 Somerville, MA 02144 www.resistinc.org; resistinc@igc.org

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Will You Still Feed Me When I’m 64?
Pension Plan Available for Progressive Activists

DENISE HANNA

Offering full benefits to employees that work in small organizations or for community leaders that work on a project-by-project basis has long been a challenge. Often the lack of benefits forces well-intended individuals to leave community work as a paid career. A groundbreaking initiative by the National Organizers Alliance proves it is possible for small nonprofits to create a system of insurance and pension that is affordable and in line with their progressive mission.

A group of 26 folks working in the progressive movement came together in November 1992 to form the National Organizers Alliance (NOA). Ranging across race, generation, sexual orientation, geography and organizing focus, they launched a membership association to foster the survival, encourage the vocation and bolster the effectiveness of those who work for social, economic and environmental justice.

They quickly realized that sometimes the struggle for justice and dignity begins at home, in our own organizations and workplaces. While NOA was under construction, James Forman, a well-known veteran of the civil rights movement, found himself battling cancer. Having spent his entire life working for justice, he was struggling to cope with a life-threatening illness without the economic and emotional benefits of medical insurance or retirement savings. Friends and fellow activists across the nation contributed to his medical costs, but sending money was clearly not enough.

“We were stunned, and outraged, that someone of Jim’s stature and dedication had no safety net, even after a lifetime of service to our community,” explains former NOA executive director Kim Fellner. “We wanted to make sure that coming generations of activists would not be in the same boat, but have viable benefits enabling them to make a long-haul commitment to work in this nonprofit sector. What we needed was not charity, but systemic change.”

That’s exactly what NOA set out to do.

Realizing Needs to Needs Realization
To begin the process, the NOA Benefits Committee conducted a survey to see what was most needed by their co-workers in the field. The results were clear. While 75 percent of all the respondents had some form of medical insurance—albeit too expensive and often inadequate—only 25 percent (mostly union workers) had any kind of pension.

The committee also quickly realized the importance of designing a program that encouraged a diverse population to work in the sector. Traditionally, many of the people doing this work already had a de facto safety net: they were white, young, male, middle and upper class college graduates who could afford to do the work until something else came along. However, a large percentage of NOA’s membership was female, of color and worked in poor communities—people historically less likely to have pension coverage or other benefits. NOA pledged to do better.

NOA began the daunting task of designing and implementing a retirement pension plan to meet the needs of its very diverse, very mobile, membership—a group of highly dedicated and poorly paid practitioners. To do this, NOA clearly needed support. The Committee identified a small cadre of progressive foundations that all helped underwrite the initial planning work. The group was also lucky to find a small team of dedicated union-side pension experts who provided legal and technical support during the planning process and continue to do so as Pension Plan Trustees.

The result is the NOA Retirement Pension Plan, a multiple-employer 401(k). That’s not mysterious or unusual—basically it means that employers join the NOA Pension Plan and participants each have a 401(k) account to which contributions are made. When the employee retires, she either buys an annuity or takes the contributions plus earnings out in one lump sum.

Features for Roaming Activists
The NOA Pension Plan architects included some nuances to the Plan to reflect the needs of people who work in the private nonprofit sector, particularly those who work for change in their communities.

Affordability is a primary concern. Since the folks who work in this sector do it as a labor of love rather than profit, many are striving just to make a living wage. The NOA Plan had to be more than a pre-tax savings device for employees to invest part of their salaries before paying Uncle Sam. To ensure that those who most need the safety net actually get one, the NOA Plan requires that the employer make a contribution on the employees’ behalf. Once an employee is enrolled her employer is required to contribute at least five percent of her gross salary to her 401(k) account, and she can make additional voluntary contributions.

Additionally, the people who do this work are very mobile. They move around within their community, or their focus is issue-based and they move from one community to another. In either case, we had to design a pension that was portable. A 401(k) allows that flexibility. When a participant moves from one participating organization to another, all we do is change the contract number. Or the account can be held in abeyance until the person joins another participating organization.

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Will You Still Feed Me When I’m 64?

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We also knew that many people in our sector, like James Forman, had been working for years without benefits. One of the breakthroughs of the NOA Plan is to get participating organizations within the sector to agree that service at any progressive justice organization counts toward both eligibility and vesting. Vesting is the number of years you must have been employed before the money contributed by your employer is absolutely yours and can never be taken away (the money employees themselves contribute is theirs from day one). To make sure that old-timers and those who move from job to job within the sector are fully included, participants accrue time toward eligibility and vesting for the work they have done in the progressive movement from 1985 forward.

Finally, we knew that our participants would want the opportunity to put their money where their politics were. When we requested proposals from investment carriers, it included a requirement that the NOA Pension Plan enrollees would have access to socially screened funds.

Launching the Plan & Keeping It Afloat

Knowing what you want and getting there is not always easy. The design and implementation of the NOA Retirement Pension Plan took four-and-a-half years of hard work. On September 26, 1997, the Plan was unveiled at the third biannual NOA Gathering, and three organizations joined the Plan.

“We were incredibly fortunate,” comments Mark Toney, founding NOA member, Pension Trustee and executive director of the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO) in Oakland, CA. “Our attorneys put in hundreds of pro bono hours to help structure a unique Plan that dealt with the realities of our sector—and CTWO was excited to be the first signatory. The folks who work at CTWO are mostly young and of color and it felt great to join a social justice pension plan that had us in mind, and honored our contribution to the field.”

The Plan now includes 93 groups, 681 participants and more than $3.8 million in assets. It’s growing at a pretty steady pace and there are systems in place to ensure that things run smoothly.

In January 2000 NOA hired a pension coordinator to be a liaison between MetLife Insurance Company (which has been a part of the Plan since day one), Carday Associates (a third-party administrator) and the participants, as well as to increase enrollment. NOA’s Pension Coordinator works closely with groups interested in joining. The groups are encouraged to see the commitment as a fixed cost, to recognize the tremendous cost of attrition in their organizations and the movement at large; and to talk to the funders.

Toward the Future

Since its inception, only a few organizations have left the Plan because they could not afford the required employer contribution. Since 9/11, many groups have been struggling politically and economically, and it has not been easy for them to remain involved. We are living in difficult times with an uncertain future, which is exactly why building an endowment for the Plan and providing activists with funds for retirement is more critical than ever.

In many respects, NOA’s pension plan was an experiment—an experiment that is working. The Plan is now in 22 states including the District of Columbia. The groups have as few as one employee and as many as 20. Their budgets can be as high as $1 million and as low as $70,000. The participants work for immigrants’ rights, environmental justice, reproductive rights, gay rights and civil rights, in neighborhood groups and unions, even in a few progressive foundations! Their passion has drawn them to the work. NOA offers a pension plan that will help keep them there.

This article is adapted from Nonprofit Quarterly (Spring 2002, Volume 9, Issue 1). Denise Hanna was the national benefits coordinator for the National Organizers Alliance. For more information on the NOA Pension Plan, as well as a fun, interactive cartoon explaining its terms and benefits, visit the NOA website at www.noacentral.org, or contact Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz, Pension Organizer, NOA, 715 G Street SE, Washington, DC 20003.

Resources for Progressive Activists

Listed below are a number of resources that may be useful to progressive activists in the areas of training, fund raising, technical assistance and resource development. This list is in no way exhaustive, and not all of the organizations below are progressive or radical politically. However, these groups offer a good starting point to find other useful resources and, hopefully, enhance the movement for social change. Please contact them at the addresses listed below.

Adbusters Culture Jammers
1243 West 7th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V6H 1B7 Canada; www.adbusters.org

Adbusters is a global network of artists, activists and rabble rousers who create advertising parodies, help formulate communication campaigns and publish the magazine Adbusters.

Applied Research Center
3781 Broadway, Oakland, CA 94611; http://www.arc.org

The Applied Research Center is a public policy, educational and research institute whose work emphasizes issues of race and social change. In addition to publishing ColorLines, ARC supports a number of grassroots public policy initiatives, including the Action Education project, ERASE (Expose Racism and Advance School Excellence) and WARP (Welfare Advocacy Research Project).

Center for Community Change
1000 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Washington DC 20007; www.communitychange.org

The Center provides support and training, including on-site assistance, capacity building and leadership development to help low-income people build powerful organizations through which they can change their communities and public policies.

Center for Third World Organizing
1218 E. 21st Street, Oakland, CA 94606; www.ctwo.org; ctwo@ctwo.org

The Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO) is a 20-year-old training and resource center that promotes and sustains direct action organizing in communities of color in the United States. CTWO’s pro-

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Media Channel
575 8th Avenue, New York, NY 10018; www.mediacchannel.org

Media Channel offers news, reports and commentary from an international network of media-issues organizations and publications, including thematic special reports, action toolkits, and a media-issues database.

Midwest Academy
28 E. Jackson St. #605, Chicago, IL 60604; www.midwestacademy.com

The Midwest Academy offers on-site training and consulting, as well as five-day training sessions for leaders and staff of progressive community groups.

MoveOn.org
www.moveon.org

MoveOn assembles online activists worldwide. Individual members decide the direction of campaigns by choosing which issues become MoveOn’s major strategic priorities for the current congress.

National Organizers Alliance
715 G Street SE, Washington DC 20003; www.noacentral.org

NOA seeks to advance progressive organizing for social, economic, environmental and racial justice. They provide resources (see page 3) and sponsor national gatherings and trainings for activists.

National Network of Grantmakers
138 Court Street, #427, Brooklyn, NY 11201; www.nng.org

NNG publishes the Grantmakers Directory, a comprehensive guide to social change philanthropy, and provides the Common Grant Application.

Nonprofit GENIE
c/o CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 706 Mission Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco CA 94103; www.genie.org

A project of CompassPoint, the Nonprofit Genie provides resources, information, advice, and answers to frequently asked questions for the nonprofit community.

Organizers’ Collaborative
Box 400897, Cambridge, MA 02140; www.organizersonow.net/odb.html

Organizers’ Collaborative provides free software and technical assistance resources to the social change community, including the Organizers Database.

Political Research Associates
1310 Broadway, Suite 201, Somerville, MA 02144; www.publiceye.org

PRA, independent research center monitoring and analyzing the US political right, publishes The Public Eye magazine and provide several tool kits for activists.

Poverty & Race Research Action Council
3000 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 200, Washington, DC 20008; www.prrac.org

PRRAC is a non-partisan, national organization convened by major civil rights, civil liberties and anti-poverty groups. Its purpose is to link social science research to advocacy work in order to successfully address the intersection of race and poverty.

Project South
9 Gammon Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia 30315; www.projectsouth.org

Project South is a community-based membership institute that develops and conducts popular political and economic education and action research for organizing and liberation.

The Ruckus Society
369 15th Street Oakland, CA 94612; www.ruckus.org

The Ruckus Society provides environmental and human rights organizers with activist tools, training, and support. They use skill-shares and trainings to instruct groups, individuals, and organizations on the application of tactical and strategic tools.

Western States Center
PO Box 40305, Portland, OR 97240; www.westernstatescenter.org

WSC provides training to build a progressive movement for social, economic, racial and environmental justice, including consultation, training and policy analysis to build statewide public policy coalitions and encourage citizen leaders to seek and hold public office.

ZNet
www.zmag.org/weluser.htm

Affiliated with Z Magazine, ZNet is a website designed to convey information through diverse watch areas and sub-sites. The site offers information, translations, archives, links to other progressive sites, a daily commentary program, and useful search engines.
It’s for Their Own Good

Reviewing Theories of Human Rights and “Humanitarian Intervention”

FRANK BRODHEAD

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s brought to an end not only the Cold War, but also the intellectual frameworks predicated on a bi-polar world. Gone was not only “mutually assured destruction,” but the mutual containment of two empires or blocs that primarily focused their war-making on subduing revolts or opposition within their respective backyards.

But with the end of the Cold War, new vistas opened for both the American elites intent on imperial expansion (which we can now see in Afghanistan and Iraq) and for liberals and reformists who envisioned a new foreign policy based on enforcing justice and promoting human rights. In terms of the latter, the 1990s saw the culmination of several decades of work by “nongovernmental organizations” (NGOs)—for example Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch—in elevating the status of individual and group “human rights” (and not just states) as fundamental constituents of political life and international law.

In the last few years, however, we have witnessed the use of “human rights” as a justification for military intervention. The growing importance of “human rights” and NGOs, and the emergence of liberal or social democratic support for wars of “humanitarian intervention,” are distinguishing features of the post-Cold War world.

Writers Examine Humanitarian Intention

These developments, and their consequences for war, peace, and world order, are the subjects of David Chandler’s fascinating book, From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention. In a study that combines history, political philosophy, and developments in international law, Chandler asks some hard questions. What is this “International Community” and “civil society”? Who elected it? To whom is it responsible? And how is it other than a mask for large (and predominately white) states that use “human rights” as a justification for intervention and a renewed colonialism?

Indeed, Chandler argues that rather than enhancing the dignity or importance of the individual (as opposed to the state), human rights theory and practice diminishes the capacity of the poor to govern themselves, seeing everywhere “victims,” “failed states,” and a quasi-racist incapacity of poor people of color to govern themselves and develop modern societies without the prolonged tutelage of educated white people from advanced industrial countries and in-country elites supported by them. While Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq have borne the burden of “humanitarian” military intervention, human rights arguments for intervention around issues of development, governance, and international justice are brought to bear on African and other poor countries as well.

From Chandler’s work, as well as from the writings of the major advocates of “humanitarian intervention,” it is evident that the 1999 US/NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia—the Kosovo War—was a defining moment, one where the goals of human rights activists seemed to be taken up by the United States and many European countries. In Fools’ Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions, Diana Johnstone makes a powerful argument that the destruction of Yugoslavia had little to do with the defense of human rights, and much more to do with British, German, and American interests in the Balkans. In part, Johnstone’s study fills a gap between Susan Woodward’s magnificent Balkan Tragedy, which takes the story up to 1995, and Noam Chomsky’s The New Military Humanism, which closely examines the myths and realities of the US/NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, supposedly in defense of the Albanian-speaking people in the Yugoslavia province of Kosovo.

But Johnstone also gives us fascinating historical studies of the roots of conflict between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, and of the remarkable success that they had in creating a vibrant and modern nation before being hit by economic and political crises that coincided with the end of the Cold War. Of particular importance is her analysis of why and how European social democratic intellectuals, in recent decades nearly universally opposed to war—especially US-led wars—served as leading advocates and apologists for the destruction of Yugoslavia and the US bombing. Johnstone’s book is here complemented by Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman’s useful study, Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis, which analyzes the subservient role that the media in the NATO countries played in supporting the war and suppressing facts incompatible with the official line of “humanitarian intervention.”

“Human rights,” the main rationale for the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, was a useful argument for the Bush administration in its 2001 war on Afghanistan, and it carried most of the self-identified supporters of “humanitarian intervention” with it. The US was less successful, however, in enlisting these new supporters of Great Power intervention in its war on Iraq, and at least some are publicly questioning their views on the ways and means that “human rights” can be enforced by the US military.

Yet in a recent symposium in The Nation on “humanitarian intervention,” none of the opponents of the US war on Iraq saw the need to retract their earlier support for the bombing of Yugoslavia. Clearly, “humanitarian intervention” is an issue that has great attraction for left and liberal intellectuals, and thus needs to be examined seriously by all opponents of war and imperialism.

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GRANTS

Resist awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in activism for social and economic justice. In this issue of the Newsletter we list a few grant recipients from our August 2003 allocation cycle. For information, contact the groups at the addresses below.

3rd EyE Youth Movement
800 Purchase Street, Box 16
New Bedford, MA 02740

3rd EyE was started in 1998 by three New Bedford youth who wanted to make changes in their community through positive, creative activism. 3rd EyE encourages youth to use their “3rd eye” in order to critically evaluate real life situations and current events. 3rd EyE achieves this goal by producing a monthly television program, PUT OUT THE WORD!, staging performances of Hip Hop-based art forms at schools and other venues; publishing socially conscious poetry and art; and organizing community events and youth festivals that incorporate Hip Hop art forms and sports to bring together diverse groups of youth for discussion and action.

A RESIST grant of $3,000 will provide the 3rd EyE youth activist organization with general support toward inspiring awareness and social justice activism in its community.

Activist San Diego
4581 Alhambra Street
San Diego, CA 92107
www.activistsandiego.org

Activist San Diego (ASD) formed in 1999 to allow activists to coordinate their responses to the bombing in Iraq in an effective, well-organized manner. Since then, ASD has continued to foster collaborative organizing by providing crucial cyber-activism tools, such as a weekly e-Newsletter; an open-access website; shared computer and media resources; and a series of educational programs that foster networking and youth empowerment. ASD uses these programs to build sustainable networks across San Diego’s diverse communities.

A RESIST grant of $2,000 will provide general support to ASD to strengthen inter-ethnic civic participation and leadership diversity.

Pintig Cultural Group
4750 N Sheridan Road, #481
Chicago, IL 60640
www.pintig.org

Pintig was established in April 1991 by a group of Filipino immigrants who wanted to create a venue in which the issues and experiences of the Filipino American community could be expressed in a political and artistic way. Pintig, meaning “pulse” in Tagalog, fosters the creation and dramatization of socially- and politically-conscious theater pieces that give artistic voice to the history and current reality of Filipino Americans.

A RESIST grant of $3,000 will provide general support to the Pintig Cultural Group so that it may continue to challenge both Filipino American and non-Filipino community members to question their internalized values on racial, gender and class stereotyping using theater and its interactive processes.

Appalachian Women’s Alliance
PO Box 688
Floyd, VA 24091
awa@swva.net

The Appalachian Women’s Alliance formed in 1993 to give voice to low-income and working women from African-American, Cherokee, and poor White Appalachian communities. The Appalachian Women’s Alliance is a grassroots network that empowers women to end the isolation, white male dominance, poverty, violence, homophobia, and racism that plague their communities and their lives. These goals are achieved through anti-racism education and training, publication of the Appalachian Women’s Journal, the Ironweed Festival for feminist artists and activists, the Women’s Caravan which brings messages of empowerment directly to rural communities, and an annual Sister Gathering of all Appalachian Women’s Alliance circles.

A RESIST grant for $3,000 will fund general support for the Appalachian Women’s Alliance to organize communities across Appalachia for social justice.