

## **CHALLENGE CORPORATE POWER, ASSERT THE PEOPLE'S RIGHTS**

### **THE DEMOCRATIC ARTS: WHAT IT TAKES TO DO DEMOCRACY**

#### **Attitudes and Skills for Participatory Democracy**

An organization, institution or society is democratic to the degree that its members share leadership and responsibility, and individually and collectively have the skills needed to do so. While there is training for most human endeavors, until relatively recently group membership and citizenship — cornerstones of a civil society — have been taken for granted rather than understood to involve attitudes and tasks to be learned and practiced. From the smallest meeting to the largest legislative body, the majority of participants are not empowered, either philosophically or practically, to interact cooperatively, make decisions democratically and act on them effectively. The Committee on Corporations, Trade & Democracy offers training in THE DEMOCRATIC ARTS to WILPF branches and geographic areas.

#### **A COMMITMENT TO PLURALISM AND DIVERSITY**

Diversity is a given; the only choice is whether we recognize its importance and create processes that invite wide and varied participation. Differences within any group representative of our society will be not only those of race, gender, ethnicity, age, class, religion, and sexuality, but of opinions, worldviews, ways of learning and communicating. These can all be sources of greater power, richness and effectiveness rather than bones of contention.

#### **CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

In any group of thinking, feeling people, there will be contention. Conflict is natural and potentially creative. In both interpersonal and societal relationships, its satisfactory resolution is central to authentic democratic process. Without open-mindedness and specific skills, some people stifle their voices and others prevail by aggression, thus disempowering both individuals and the group.

#### **DECISION MAKING WITHOUT LOSERS**

Many people equate democracy and voting. While ballots may have uses in a democracy, a group's automatic resort to voting inevitably results in winners and losers, whether these be issues or candidates. Consensual processes, on the other hand, place more responsibility on the group as a whole and its members to work cooperatively, speak and listen carefully, and seek creative solutions. Consensus attempts to synthesize all the ideas in the group instead of selecting one among several. Because this approach to discussion and decision-making is not generally part of US culture, it is important to have training in its assumptions and processes.

## **HOLDING FUN AND FAIR MEETINGS**

Meetings are a major arena in which democracy processes are enacted — or not. The best of intentions won't make a meeting effective or democratic if there aren't the agreements and commitments, structures and skills that enable each member to participate freely and fully. Training includes how to: involve people in the planning, conducting and follow-up of the meeting; build lively agendas; facilitate effectively; communicate clearly; solve problems and resolve conflict.

## **PLANNING AND PROBLEM SOLVING**

Another set of group tasks involves setting goals and establishing priorities; developing proposals; doing short- and long-range planning; implementing organizational decisions and change. These generally set the direction and provide the substance of a group's meetings and activity. Clear, commonly understood and accessible processes are essential to cooperative forward movement and accomplishment.

## **ORGANIZING**

How do people communicate their concerns? Form a group? Hold an event? Gain support from others for their efforts? Organizing includes door knocking, phoning and fundraising; media and public relations work; identifying and sharing tasks. It requires accountability, follow-up and evaluation, both during and on completion of a project.

## **THE FISHBOWL: HOLDING DEMOCRATIC DISCUSSIONS IN LARGE GROUPS**

In Arcata, California, hundreds of citizens debated the question "Can we have democracy when large corporations wield so much power and wealth under law?" by using a technique of democratic conversation known as "the fishbowl."

Six chairs, each with its own microphone, were set up in a circle in the center of the high-school multi-purpose room. Surrounding these were concentric rings of seats for the "audience." Periodically a conversant seated at the center would relinquish her seat to be replaced by someone from the audience, a seamless transition that allowed the conversation taking place in the inner circle to continue uninterrupted.

The purpose is to develop a conversation that is not dominated by conversants making independent statements. Ideally any person who wishes to participate in the conversation eventually will be seated. Fishbowls thus can change public discussions from adversarial confrontations to more respectful, democratic conversations.

For more information on the fishbowl technique, please contact Ben Sher at 916-489-3553 or [benjmshe@aol.com](mailto:benjmshe@aol.com).