

The Detroit News

THE FINAL WORD

LABOR VOICES

What is ALEC, and why should you care?

Last Thursday, the Michigan Legislature adjourned for 2013. Before they did, they passed some deeply troubling bills that do not reflect the values of working families in our state. Whether you are concerned about restrictions on critical women's health care, political spending and transparency, or quality public education — one question is obvious: who comes up with this stuff?

While the bills that sped through our Legislature this year are still being researched and tracked, every day we are learning more about the origins of bad bills from 2011 and 2012, some of which are now law.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the State Policy Network (SPN) are corporate-funded, right-wing organizations that push an agenda focused on attacking workers' rights, blocking access to affordable healthcare, defunding and privatizing public education, suppressing voting rights, lowering taxes for corporations and the ultra-wealthy, cutting essential public spending and destroying the environment.

ALEC is a corporate bill mill. It is not just a lobby or a front group; it is much more powerful than that. Through ALEC, corporate lobbyists and state legislators vote on "model bills," behind closed doors, without any public input, which often benefit the corporations' bottom line.

Corporations fund almost all of ALEC's operations and pay for a seat on ALEC task forces. ALEC and ALEC corporations often pay for legislators to go to lavish resorts to participate in ALEC, but when ALEC or the corporations are not paying for these so-called "scholarships," the expense is often passed on to the taxpayers. The Center for Media and Democracy has identified at least 39 current or former Michigan legislators who used taxpayer funds to pay ALEC membership dues between 2005 and 2011.

In ALEC board documents recently published by The Guardian, ALEC proposes state chairs — and possibly other legislators — take an oath to ALEC. The oath requires legislators to "put the interests of the organization [ALEC] first" and to be "morally responsible for the health and well being" of ALEC. The proposed oath also requires legislators to "inform ALEC of any public records/FOIA requests that include ALEC documents," which suggests ALEC is taking further steps to hide its activities.

The lawmakers of Michigan owe their undivided allegiance to



(Dale G. Young / The Detroit News)

Does the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) have undue influence in the Legislature?

the people of Michigan. Anything else is something dangerous and less than democracy.

Several corporations and special interest groups that are ALEC members and sponsors are headquartered in Michigan, most notably the DeVos family's Amway Corporation and the Mackinac Center. Dick DeVos even went so far as to identify the Mackinac Center as one of the primary forces behind the push for so-called right to work, which is an ALEC-style law with corporate priorities.

The legality of the Mackinac Center's lobbying operations have been called into question by Congressman Sander Levin and the ACLU.

Yet, Governor Snyder has adopted several Mackinac agenda items as his own priorities, including attacking pensions, rolling back corporate regulations, and privatizing public services.

Every voter in Michigan should ask their legislator: are you a member of ALEC? And reporters have a professional responsibility to raise one simple question every time a new bill is introduced: Is this ALEC model legislation?

Our government should not be a pay-to-play operation. We should be asking more questions about ALEC and legislators have much more explaining to do.

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