

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR
by Chris Taylor

Undercover at ALEC

ON DAY ONE OF MY FIRST ALEC CONVENTION, I WORE MY MOST conservative outfit and did my best Michele Bachmann impersonation. Progressive Democrats don't generally go to meetings of the American Legislative Exchange Council unless they are protesting outside. But after my predecessor, Mark Pocan, moved on from the state legislature in Wisconsin to the U.S. Congress, I decided to follow in his footsteps and become an ALEC member—something any state legislator can do.

To say I had no idea what to expect is an understatement.

In fact, after joining ALEC, registering for the conference, and shelling out almost \$1,000 in fees, I still couldn't get my hands on the conference agenda.

This led me to wonder what they were hiding.

After three attempts to obtain the agenda by my legislative office for the Chicago conference in August, I finally received a bootleg copy from another interloper.

Wisconsin State Representative Chris Taylor, Democrat of Madison, was elected in 2011. An attorney, wife, and mother, she previously worked as the public policy director for Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin.

While I arrived in Chicago knowing little about what the day held, by the end of the day one thing was clear: I was on another planet.

ALEC brings together a whole galaxy of resources to persuade state legislators to enact a special interest and corporate agenda that includes privatizing everything that is public so that corporations can make more money. ALEC is intent on eliminating federal regulations that could interfere with corporations making as much money as possible, and disabling the federal government so that it really can't do much.

As keynote speaker Stephen Moore, founder of the Club for Growth and editorial board member of *The Wall Street Journal*, stated, "What we really need is more rich people."

Though legislators and corporations supposedly coexist equally in the ALEC universe, it was abundantly clear to me that the special interests and big corporations run the show. During a workshop on limiting the power of the federal government, the Citizens for Self-Governance promised a bevy of resources, including bundling campaign contribution-sand training an army of grassroots activists, to legislators leading their states in calling for a constitutional convention to, among other things, prohibit federal mandates on states. The presenters entreated legislators to act now to “save the Republic.”

As I attended workshops on education, labor and employment, “federalism,” tort “reform,” energy, and the environment, I realized that ALEC had invaded Wisconsin in a far more comprehensive way than I had believed. Our state has become an ALEC petri dish in preparation for what they hope is an ALEC nation, where corporations grow ever more powerful and the government exists primarily to help them.

It’s happening already. Wisconsin, which introduced private, unaccountable voucher schools two decades ago in Milwaukee, now has them statewide. And almost twenty other states are following through.

Former Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen, now a senior adviser to the American Federation for Children, made a presentation to the ALEC Education Task Force, where he gleefully reported that two-to-three new states each year adopt the private voucher school system.

His and ALEC’s goal is to privatize public education in every state. They believe the question is no longer if a state will adopt vouchers, but when.

In labor and employment matters, ALEC continues to work diligently to make it harder for employees to receive workers’ compensation and unemployment insurance, as it has already succeeded in doing in states such as Wisconsin.

I also sat through an extensive pre-

sentation in ALEC’s “Labor and Business Regulation” subcommittee on a model bill restricting a state’s ability to license and regulate occupations.

And in tort “reform,” ALEC has already had success in Wisconsin with model bills limiting punitive damage awards, stalling asbestos litigation, and shielding corporations from liability for defective products.

ALEC also brags about states like Wisconsin that have rejected additional Medicaid funds and cut taxes

ALEC also gives lawmakers the support of a network of conservative think tanks, which exist in pretty much every state, that provide data and research.

After two days at the ALEC convention, I realized how badly out-gunned we are.

On one of the private, air-conditioned shuttles ALEC provided, I sat next to a lobbyist from Florida. He said how great it



KEVIN SOMERS

for the most wealthy.

And, of course, ALEC advocates unlimited money in politics.

Regardless of the issue, ALEC uses the same buzzwords over and over again: “freedom,” “liberty,” “free market,” “reform.”

For rightwing legislators, ALEC makes it easy, and we have nothing anywhere comparable for progressive state lawmakers.

Along with “model” bills comes every piece of information (whether true or not) you could ever need, including handbooks and manuals with proactive and reactive talking points.

was to be at ALEC, where “you don’t have to watch what you say.” Then he shared his idea for a constitutional amendment to require that all federal agency regulations receive Congressional approval. When I suggested that voters might not be that excited about changing the Constitution for regulatory “reform,” he responded that you didn’t really need the consent of the people if you had Republican control of enough states and the corporate money that would surely fund such an initiative.

In ALEC nation, government works best once you get the people out of the way. ♦