

# THE PROBLEM WITH GREEN CORPS

By Nathaniel Miller

There are a lot of great opportunities out there for young activists after or instead of college. Some are, in my opinion, much better than others. After I graduated from the University of Delaware in 2002 I decided to accept a job with Green Corps, the “Field School for Environmental Organizing.” It sounded like a wonderful opportunity, but it was anything but that. During the four months I worked for Green Corps they engaged in union-busting and openly opposed affirmative action, environmental justice, and other efforts to diversify the environmental movement. During my time with the organization Green Corps members were constantly evaluated for their personal and political beliefs, and were fired if they spoke up to change the program. While it is true that many great organizers come out of Green Corps, and the program does teach some valuable skills, it is a top-down organization and its structure is fundamentally undemocratic, which, I believe ultimately hurts the environmental movement. This article is the story about my experience with Green Corps. I can only speak from personal experience, but I have heard many similar stories from other people who were part of Green Corps and its parent organizations—PIRG (Public Interest Research Groups) and the FUND for Public Interest Research.

Green Corps sounded like the ideal program. I had been an activist in college and Green Corps claimed that it took college graduates, trained them, and paid them to work for a year on various campaigns with big-name environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace. Furthermore, Green Corps claimed that it helped place people in environmental and social justice jobs after the yearlong program ended. I couldn’t believe that I would have the opportunity to get paid to be an activist. Granted, the pay wasn’t great, but it was something. Green Corps sounded too good to be true.

It first occurred to me that something was wrong during my “interview weekend.” Approximately 800 people apply to Green Corps every year. All of the applicants receive phone interviews, and about one-third of those interviews are called to a “second interview weekend.” There are five “second interview weekends” held in different cities throughout February and March. At each “sec-

ond interview” approximately fifty applicants compete for five or six job openings (there are 25-30 job openings in Green Corps every year).

The atmosphere of competition during the interview weekend was palpable. We were constantly being told that the best way to become an effective professional organizer was through Green Corps, that their model was the only legitimate way to create social change, and that Green Corps was the “vanguard of the environmental movement.” It struck me that most of what Green Corps employees were saying was scripted. It was also clear that they were trying to create an atmosphere of hyper-competition to make the job all the more appealing, in other words, so that it really would be an *honor* to be offered a job.

At one point during the weekend we had individual interviews with Green Corps employees or Board Members. I had my interview with Green Corps’ Executive Director, Leslie Samuelrich. She asked me various questions about why I wanted to work for Green Corps and “why I wanted to work on the environment” (most of my college activism was labor and social justice related). I explained to her that I believed that all these issues were inexorably linked and that it was impossible to separate them. This did not seem to satisfy Samuelrich and she kept it up, telling me that the environmental movement and the social justice movement were *not* the same and should not be linked. I brought up the issue of environmental justice, whereupon Samuelrich promptly replied that the environmental justice movement was not the environmental movement, that in fact environmental justice did not go to the root of the problem, but only served a stopgap measure.

I returned to Delaware the next morning and three or four days later was surprised that Leslie Samuelrich offered me a job. Despite the peculiar nature of the interview weekend I accepted and was excited to have the job, because unlike most of my friends I had something tangible to look forward to and spent the rest of the semester relaxing. I spent the following summer before Green Corps’ training living with a friend at a cabin in the Catskill Mountains.

That August I packed my important possessions into my car and drove to Boston to begin my Green Corps year. The first part of

Green Corps is a three-week training on how to be an “effective organizer.”

There were thirty-one people in Green Corps’ class of 2003 at the start of the year, although this number quickly shrank. There were also seven members of “Central Staff.” The first night we were all in Boston we had to give personal testimonies before the group. This consisted of a two or three minute explanation of “what led each of us to be in this room.” We were encouraged to be as personal and open as possible. Some people talked about their family background, other talked of their activist experience in college. The members of Central Staff also participated and told clearly scripted stories of how they came to work for Green Corps.

The next morning we met in a classroom of Suffolk University to officially begin our training. Leslie Samuelrich was there to introduce Green Corps to us. We learned that Green Corps’ mission was to “train the next generation of environmental leaders while making an impact on the environment today.” What she did not tell us right then is that Green Corps has a very narrow definition of who qualifies as an “environmental leader” and what constitutes the “environmental movement.”

Those first few days of training we learned that Green Corps was founded in 1991 by PIRG (Public Interest Research Groups) to train “environmental leaders” with a PIRG model of organizing—That is, top-down and opposed to anti-oppression efforts to make the group accessible to those who don’t happen to be upper-middle class and white.

After a couple of days the first people started to leave Green Corps. The first two women that left followed a pattern that would manifest itself throughout the rest of the year—that is, they were simply “disappeared” in the middle of the night. Literally they would be in training one day participating in the workshops, and then the next day they were gone. Central Staff gave us only the most basic explanation: “so-and-so felt that Green Corps was a poor fit for them,” and would not answer any other questions. Ultimately out of a starting “class” of thirty-one participants, only fourteen finished the year, six people leaving during the first three weeks.

Five days into the August training Dan Compton was the first person that was out-

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and-out fired for what he believes was his dyed blue hair and his interest in radical social change. Again the only explanation that was given was that “Green Corps decided that Dan was not the right fit for the organization.” I later learned that he had been forced to pack his bags early in the morning and was then hustled out of the dorms while we were at training.

Another Green Corps organizer, Natalie, was told by her supervisor Naomi Roth that she had gotten places in life solely “because of her looks,” and was placed on a period of probation for being “too process-oriented.” She completed a “probationary period,” primarily by keeping silent during group discussions, and was finally given a placement just a few days before the “class” was to leave for our field placements, but because of her experience felt unfit to continue working for Green Corps and quit.

At the conclusion of its first classroom training in August, Green Corps held an organization-wide discussion session in which it was implied the class could speak freely about the occurrences which took place during the first two and half weeks of employment. I was one of the most vocal participants in this discussion, along with another Green Corps organizer named Daniel Gross. We criticized the atmosphere of fear created by the way Green Corps fired Dan Compton and withheld field placements to organizers such as Natalie, and another organizer, Dana Garfin, who was also placed on probation. We argued that it is discrimination to fire someone based on their political beliefs. When asked why Green Corps didn’t provide written contracts we were told that we didn’t need them because we had “oral contracts.” Both Daniel and I were later simultaneously fired.

After the August training was complete we were sent into the field to work on campaigns with various environmental organizations. Some people worked on Clean Energy issues with Greenpeace in Florida and California. I went to work with the Sierra Club in Madison, Wisconsin. Each “team” was assigned an “Organizing Director” who worked out of Green Corps’ office in Boston, MA. The other people on my “campaign team” were scattered throughout the country, and I thought that I would have some autonomy with my campaign. I was wrong.

I thoroughly enjoyed working with the Sierra Club in Wisconsin. All the Sierra Club people I worked with were amazing and I had

a great time in Madison. My campaign was running smoothly and I had recruited a number of interns that were putting a lot of hard work and energy into our campaign against Ford Motor Company. But despite the support I received from the Sierra Club I did not have any real control over the direction of the campaign. We had to have frequent one-on-one calls with our Organizing Directors, and during these calls Naomi and I spoke surprising little about the campaign. Most of her questions to me focused on my own political analysis, and how in many ways she felt it was “wrong.” For example she felt that I placed too much emphasis on direct action and anti-oppression work. She felt that this kind of work gave the environmental movement a “bad image.” Most of the conversations went on like that and when I tried to steer them back to the campaign Naomi would again change the subject back to my personal politics.

This went on for a couple months until October 19 when our “class” came together again in Boston for the second training session. During this session, we were given instructions on how to recruit people for the following year. Diversity considerations were completely omitted from this training. In response to Daniel Gross’ questioning this omission, two organization-wide sessions were held to “discuss” how we could make Green Corps a more diverse organization. Daniel and I both vehemently argued for affirmative action to increase Green Corps’ diversity (there was only one person of color out of 31 people). Green Corps Central Staff argued against added emphasis on diversity in hiring practices and was visibly upset during the discussion. A number of us, including Green Corps organizer Kaitlin Nichols, argued that Green Corps should work on more environmental justice issues. During this conversation Central Staff made disparaging remarks about the environmental justice movement and other issues. For example Leslie Samuelrich, Green Corps’ Executive Director, felt that EJ was “classically self-interested NIMBYism,” and Naomi Roth stated, “The environmental movement needs to recognize its base of power is with the white middle class, and that is where we should organize.” Central Staff constantly reiterated the statement that “Diversity is not part of Green Corps’ mission.” After this discussion Daniel and I were interrogated by our respective supervisors, and among the questions that they asked us was why we “wanted to derail Green

Corps’ mission.” During my conversation with Naomi she informed me that I was on “ultimatum,” which meant that I was red-flagged to be fired.

During this October meeting Daniel and I started to circulate the idea of forming a union to prevent arbitrary terminations and to ensure diversity. We met with a small group of people at a bar to discuss the idea. On the way to the meeting, on the Boston Metro, we noticed that Naomi was following us and trying to listen to our conversation. When we noticed her she quietly got up and left the Metro.

It was shortly after this October training, after we had returned to our placement cities, that Kaitlin, who, earlier was told that her “class background” made her think incorrectly, quit. She had been given increasingly unrealistic goals to fulfill and she left once it became clear to her that Central Staff was going to use this as an excuse to fire her. In response to this, Daniel and I started to talk to our fellow employees about protecting our jobs. I noticed that Naomi was doing the same things to me that Green Corps had done to Kaitlin shortly before she quit, so I started to circulate a letter among other employees explaining what was happening to me and asking them to sign their support. Two days later Daniel and I were fired.

Green Corps argued later that our mutual termination was a coincidence, but on Monday Nov. 25 2002 at exactly the same time, our supervisors (Naomi Roth and Heather Smith) arrived in Madison and Miami, the cities we were placed, to fire us. Green Corps gave us both the same reasons for the firing—that we “weren’t acting in the best interest of Green Corps.” We both requested more specific reasons and received none. In both our cases Green Corps tried to get us kicked out of our offices (the Sierra Club for me and Greenpeace for Daniel). Both the Sierra Club and Greenpeace were dismayed by our termination and the Sierra Club said I could “take as much time as I wanted” to leave my office. After we were fired, the Sierra Club people I worked with in Wisconsin, and Greenpeace folks Daniel worked with in Florida, wrote to Green Corps expressing their dismay over our termination, how it was handled, and that they were both impressed with our performance on our campaigns.

After being fired I went out to have a beer with one of my interns and while I was at the bar Naomi called me from my office

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and told me that I needed to return "immediately." My intern and I returned to find Naomi and Cassie Wyss, a Green Corps graduate from the previous year, rummaging through my desk and personal belongings throwing things into a box. Naomi said they were looking for "Green Corps property" but among the things they tried to take were newspaper clippings about my campaign, as well as my contact list for other people in Green Corps. Fortunately I was able to hide those items in my intern's backpack, because Naomi demanded to search my backpack for "Green Corps property" before she expelled me from the Sierra Club's office in Madison. Although I was able to salvage a few items, many of my personal files and documents from the campaign disappeared.

Shortly after we were fired, those left in Green Corps wrote a letter to the organization's Board of Directors recommending small changes in the program to increase morale and prevent arbitrary firings. Every remaining member of Green Corps' 2003 class, except one, signed the letter. The Chairman of the Board, Doug Phelps (also head of the National Association of State PIRGS), personally responded to each person that signed the letter. His comments were widely regarded as offensive by those who drafted and signed the letter: "There is an inevitable negative vibe created by [writing a letter to the Board]; though the Green Corps leadership seems to be willing to just move on, I myself don't like people going behind my back or over my head in an organized fashion, and especially people I'm busting my butt to train and serve, and doubly especially if I'm paying them for the privilege! Kudos to (Central Staff) for being so gracious about the whole thing... Obviously, some people this year left Green Corps or were cut from the program for simply not being willing to put in the effort, not respecting the trainers and what they have to offer, or miscomprehending the basic nature of a training program." But since almost everyone signed the letter Central Staff could not discipline them.

Throughout the rest of the year, nine more people quit Green Corps because they were dissatisfied with the organization, its policies, and how it treats its employees. For example, one woman left Green Corps when she was told that, because of time, she had to choose between going to her boyfriend's college graduation or a sibling's wedding. Another woman was told after she quit that "she had let Green Corps down because they thought she had the 'strength' to make it through the year, but clearly they were wrong."

Unfortunately Green Corps obscures these stories and thus continues to recruit large numbers of people into the organization. But don't let the recruiters fool you; it is nothing more than a thoroughly anti-democratic front group for PIRG.

My experience with Green Corps is ultimately what led me to SEAC. I was invigorated when I discovered that there is an environmental group out there that is devoted to anti-oppression, building a legitimate democratic base, and connecting to the broader social justice movement. I decided to focus my energy there.

Ultimately the most important thing to do is work for social change in any capacity, and I would never condemn anyone for choosing to work for Green Corps or PIRG. However, I feel it is important to understand who you are working for and the kind of work they are *actually* doing. And by getting involved with groups such as SEAC and the Center for Environmental Citizenship (EnviroCitizen) it is quite possible to gain the same skills that Green Corps teaches—without the hierarchy.

*The above opinions are my own and do not necessarily represent the opinions of SEAC. For more information, please contact me at nathanielmiller@yahoo.com or 610-209-1447. Some folks are starting a website where people can share their Green Corps and PIRG stories. Check it out for future postings. The address is: www.nonprofitwatch.org/greencorps*

# Youth Power Shift

is looking for a new coordinator

**contact**  
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or  
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## Regional Roundups

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### Berea College in Berea, Kentucky

Students at Berea College are getting back into the swing of things. We are almost finished with our proposal for a feminist collective, La Vida Nueva Community House, and still working on Fair Trade Coffee for our cafeteria. Also, we are reviving a women's health campaign and our Community Bike Campaign. The 10x10 clean energy campaign is also coming along as the SGA passed a student resolution in October, and the 10x10 resolution (college commitment to meet 10% of its energy demand with clean renewable energy by 2010) is now in the hands of a faculty committee (Campus Environmental Policy Committee) before it will be passed by the faculty, and, eventually, the Trustees of the college.

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### Kent State, OH

This past semester was a productive one for SEED. Fresh off our victory over Boise Cascade, we evaluated the effectiveness of the University's recycling policy. We found that residence halls had too few recycling bins or in some cases none at all. We first took a survey of exactly how many recycling bins there were in the residence halls, and contacted Campus Waste Management Services and Portage County Solid Waste Disposal, the independent contractor responsible for picking up and sorting items to be recycled. We are continuing to negotiate with them for a more efficient policy. We are also planning to circulate a petition amongst the student body calling for more recycling bins to be made available on campus. Furthermore, we are investigating the possibility that the University is sending waste to be incinerated, causing pollution and environmental injustice.

In addition, SEED also participated in the National Day of Action against Ford SUVs by first holding a demonstration in the parking lot of a local Ford dealership and then heading to a grocery store lot, where we issued "parking tickets" to SUVs, containing information about fuel efficiency.

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