

Saving the Public Good from Privatization: An Interview with Si Kahn

by Jim Tarbell

Si Kahn has worked for 40 years as a civil rights, labor, and community organizer. He is executive director of Grassroots Leadership that works to abolish for-profit private prisons. A musician and author, Si is the co-author of The Fox in the Henhouse: How Privatization Threatens Democracy.

Privatization threatens democracy because of the concentration of wealth within corporations. A democratic political system requires a democratic economy. The greater the percentage of our economy that corporations control, the greater the threat to our democracy. Privatization is a transfer of public wealth to private corporations. The goal of the privatizers is to create an economy and political system where the corporations own and operate literally everything.

The Edison Corporation is privatizing our school system. There are 120,000 people in for-profit jails. The war in Iraq is largely being fought by private corporations. Lockheed Martin is figuring out what kinds of weapons we want and runs part of the welfare system in several states. Imagine if the corporations controlled everything. It would be the end of democracy.

Privatization is an overall pattern and corporate campaign. The ideology of privatization, pushed by privatizers from the *Wall Street Journal* to our president, say the only way an economy makes progress is for private corporations to control it. On television we rarely see labor, community, feminist, or civil rights leaders. We see corporate leaders romanticized as exciting, well dressed, sexy people who can do no wrong. Corporations put billions of dollars into promoting this ideology.

The privatizers also work to destroy our faith in government, by telling us that the public sector can do no good. Historically, there have only been a couple of counterweights to corporate power—the organized popular movement and the government. If we do not have government as a counterweight to corporate power, then corporations will operate without restraint.

As people begin to see that the pattern of privatization does not work for them, they have to take up the habits of resistance. This is about developing the ability to talk to people about the imbalance between corporate privatization rhetoric and what we know from our personal experience. A mistake that people make is to challenge someone who disagrees with them. We should ask questions, not give answers. We can not tell people what to think, because it does not work, and because it is authori-

tarian. You can engage in a democratic conversation by getting people to reflect on their own experiences with corporations.

This process of challenging the privatizers is not at the point of being called a movement, because people see privatization as something that is happening close to home. There are not many organizations that talk about this as a broad pattern promoted by corporate funded think tanks, media politicians and PR firms.

We did stop the privatization of Social Security, which was a well-organized, heavily financed and seriously thought-out campaign that went down like a stone. There were staged town meetings and corporate-funded citizen groups. But everywhere they went there were: demonstrations; flyers; people calling into the radio stations and writing to their editors and people signing petitions. In state after state congressmen heard "If you take away social security, I will vote you out." The lesson is that privatization can be defeated.

Their main weapon is to persuade us that it is hopeless to stop them. Do not abandon hope. That is just giving in to them.

A Democratic Conversation of Resistance

As told by Si Kahn

I was in the Post Office a couple of weeks ago and the line was a little long. Some guy, irritated that he could not run in and out, said, "The only thing that has ever made this country great is private enterprise. It's the profit motive that creates jobs. The public sector has never done any good." And he is ignoring three hard working postal employees trying to keep people happy on a tough morning.

So I could not ignore this and said, "You must have had some great experiences with the private sector."

"Oh yeah," he replied, "It's the only thing that ever made America great."

Then I asked, "So, what kind of a car do you drive?"

Looking at me, he says some expletive and "Ohh, what a piece of junk. I can't believe I paid good money for it. It always breaks down."

"Oh, I'm sure that the corporation that built it made it good as soon as they heard that there was a problem, because, that is what made America great."

"Are you kidding?" he said, "They won't answer my phone calls and the dealer just brushes me off. I am driving this piece of junk that won't even work."

"You do know that was built by private enterprise right?" I asked.

"Yeah," he says, "I don't know what's wrong here. They make a good product."

"Well I am sorry you are having this trouble." I lamented.

"Yeah but you know it's a great country and private enterprise is what makes it that way. The government just has to follow business principles."

"Sounds good to me," I said, "Which business were you thinking of?"

He said, "What?"

"Well you know there are lots of business models out there. Which model do you think that government should follow? Enron, WorldCom, Halliburton, WalMart, these are different business models. Which one do you think would make government run better?" ...