Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00



What a difference a year makes! Last year *The Nation*'s Honor Roll recognized courageous, if often lonely, battlers against an austerity agenda, an ascendant Tea Party and a Republican electoral wave that had put Democrats, working folks and the unions that represent them on the defensive nationwide. This year we celebrate the remarkable movements that have arisen not just to stem the conservative tide but to build a new vision of progressivism for the twenty-first century. How much has changed? As 2011 finished, even Barack Obama was sounding populist themes. And progressives were organizing, fighting and winning critical battles on the streets, in the polling places and in the media. The events of 2011 did not transform America. But they did confirm that millions of Americans are ready to fight for the 99 percent.

MOST VALUABLE SENATOR: Sherrod Brown

Faced with what was supposed to be a tough re-election race in 2012, Brown could have taken the easy way out when Ohio Governor John Kasich signed legislation attacking the collective-bargaining rights of public employees. Instead, Brown leapt into the fight, speaking and rallying with the workers of Ohio and even turning what had been his campaign website into a vehicle for the movement to overturn the antilabor law. It was a gutsy move, but it paid off. Brown's poll numbers soared as Kasich's plummeted. Brown threw himself into the successful campaign to overturn Ohio's law in a November referendum. At the same time, he was fighting in Washington against flawed free-trade deals that shutter US factories while failing to bring prosperity to foreign lands. Brown, a leader in the push to address poverty and disease in developing countries, is anything but an isolationist. He's an internationalist who understands the need for global resistance to policies that privilege corporations over workers from Cleveland to Chongqing. In 2011 he linked those struggles more effectively than any other senator.

MOST VALUABLE REPRESENTATIVE: Raúl Grijalva

Few members of the House have been so consistently progressive as Arizona Democrat Grijalva, who has a history of challenging Republican, and Democratic, administrations on issues of economic justice, civil rights, and war and peace. Grijalva made headlines when—in

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

the face of death threats—he opposed Arizona's draconian anti-immigrant laws. He has been just as outspoken at the federal level, working closely with his Congressional Progressive Caucus co-chair, Keith Ellison, against the GOP austerity agenda while prodding the Obama administration to support a dramatically bolder jobs agenda. Grijalva's no-punches-pulled progressivism is all the more impressive because he represents a district where in 2010 he faced a serious re-election fight. He saw off that challenge, proving that even in the toughest years it is possible, perhaps even necessary, to run left to win.

MOST VALUABLE STATE SENATOR: Nina Turner

"An apology! An apology! I want an apology!" announced Turner, a Cleveland Democrat, as thousands cheered the defeat of Governor Kasich's antilabor legislation. Appearing on Ed Schultz's MSNBC broadcast from Columbus on the night of Ohio's historic November 8 vote, Turner was every bit as energetic and every bit as unyielding as she had been throughout the long campaign to defend the rights of public sector workers. Kasich "owes Ohioans an apology for not working on the No. 1 issue, which is jobs!" said Turner. While many Washington representatives disappointed in 2011, state legislators stepped up as champions for labor rights, the public sector and economic justice. Turner wasn't the only smart, passionate legislator to take the national stage, but the breadth of her agenda stood out. As she was standing up for workers' rights, Turner was also taking the lead on an array of economic development, voting rights and social justice issues.

MOST VALUABLE STATE REPRESENTATIVE: Diane Russell

A good case can be made that the most extreme of the new crop of radical right-wing Republican governors is Maine's Paul LePage. An equally good case can be made that no one has caused LePage more frustration than Portland Democrat Russell. With deep roots in Maine and a record of agitating for progressive causes, Russell battled to block a right-wing move to eliminate Maine's election-day-registration law. After Republicans rammed the change through, she became a leading advocate for the referendum that restored the law. Active with the Progressive States Network, Russell joined the protests in Wisconsin and returned to Maine with a renewed determination to pass pro-worker legislation. She succeeded with her work-sharing bill, which allows employers to avoid layoffs by making the state unemployment insurance program more flexible. Even Tea Party Republicans backed it.

MOST VALUABLE LOCAL OFFICIAL: Sheriff Dave Mahoney

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

The brutality of police crackdowns on the Occupy Wall Street protests from New York to California was a reminder that police do not always protect and serve. But there were notable exceptions. The most remarkable came in Madison, Wisconsin, when Governor Scott Walker ordered thousands of pro-union demonstrators cleared from the state Capitol. Mahoney, who since 2006 has been the elected sheriff for Dane County (Madison), helped coordinate the law-enforcement response to the protests outside and inside the Capitol. The sheriff said his responsibility was to protect public safety *and* First Amendment rights. As such, he objected to breaking up peaceful protests and to using deputies to shutter public spaces. "I refused to put deputy sheriffs in a position to be palace guards," explained Mahoney, whose deputies joined "Cops for Labor" demonstrations in solidarity with the protests.

MOST VALUABLE STATE COALITION: Mississippians for Healthy Families

When antiabortion crusaders succeeded in placing a "personhood" amendment on Mississippi's November ballot, many of the state's most prominent Democrats said they would vote for the proposal, which not only sought to ban abortion but also threatened access to birth control and the future of stem-cell research. Outside Mississippi, pundits assumed that the deep-red Southern state would amend its Constitution and put in play a direct challenge to *Roe v. Wade*. But ACLU of Mississippi executive director Nsombi Lambright and regional leaders of Planned Parenthood bet that voters would protect a woman's right to choose. They organized a coalition of doctors, nurses, parents, students, clergy, and women's and civil rights activists to campaign for a no vote. On election night, Mississippians rejected the measure by a 55–45 margin, proving that pro-choice politics can win anywhere in America.

MOST VALUABLE NATIONAL COALITION: The New Bottom Line

Objecting to a politics that makes Wall Street's bottom line the nation's top priority, National People's Action, People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO National Network), the Alliance for a Just Society, the Right to the City Alliance and the Main Street Alliance declared in 2011, "We need a new bottom line that puts the economic interests and financial security of working American families first." As the New Bottom Line coalition, they organized multi-state projects like the Move Our Money campaign to take \$1 billion out of big banks. And the coalition allied with the Occupy movement in its Occupy Our Homes campaign, which supports families fighting foreclosure and eviction and helps homeless families move back into their vacant foreclosed homes.

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

MOST VALUABLE AGENDA: The National Nurses' "Main Street Contract"

When most of the media and the political class echoed the austerity lie that said working Americans would have to sacrifice to pay off debts run up by Wall Street speculators, the National Nurses United union had another idea. It launched Heal America, Tax Wall Street, a campaign for a financial transactions tax, part of a broader "Main Street Contract." NNU leaders poured resources and energy into the campaign, linking it with struggles across the country and finally with the Occupy movement, for which the nurses provided on-the-ground healthcare. The agenda was clear and unapologetic in its demands, and NNU made the case, not just in the United States but working with international unions, that "an economy for the 99 percent" should be paid for by Wall Street.

MOST VALUABLE CONFRONTATION: Iowa CCI

2

When Mitt Romney came to the Iowa State Fair, he tried to peddle the fantasy that entitlement cuts are needed because the only alternative is to raise taxes on Americans. But his framing of a false choice failed when activists from Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement hollered that we should "tax corporations." Unnerved, Romney shot back, "Corporations are people, my friend." "No, they're not!" shouted the Iowa CCI crowd. "Of course they are," replied Romney, who didn't seem to realize he was embracing his own stereotype. In 2011 conservative candidates thought they could use Iowa as a backdrop for their extremist pitches. Iowa CCI didn't let them get away with it—providing a model for how grassroots activists can mic-check even the most powerful politicians.

MOST VALUABLE RAPID RESPONSE: Iraq Veterans Against the War

When Iraq War vet Scott Olsen was seriously injured during the police crackdown on Occupy Oakland, IVAW leapt into action. It used every media list and social network to provide background information, videos of the incident and access to other vets who had witnessed this brutal overreaction to nonviolent civil disobedience against an economic system that has abandoned too many vets. Veterans for Peace quickly aligned with IVAW, as did other vet

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

groups. "We Are All Scott Olsen" marches and vigils were held across the country. When Olsen had recovered enough to speak about the incident, he used TV appearances to focus poignantly and powerfully on the plight of a new generation of veterans. He reminded Americans that as a marine, he had sworn an oath to serve the Constitution, which protects the right to assemble and to petition for the redress of grievances.

MOST VALUABLE MUSICIAN: Tom Morello

Wherever protests swelled in 2011, the veteran Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave guitarist was there in his Nightwatchman persona to sing "Solidarity Forever," "This Land Is Your Land" and his own songs of the movement. After hitting the streets of Madison with Wayne Kramer of MC5 fame and the brilliant Street Dogs, Morello penned "Union Town," with its shout, "If you come to strip our rights away, we'll give you hell every time." Before the year was done, Morello, who featured footage of protests in his videos and donated proceeds to union causes, had produced *World Wide Rebel Songs*, an anthem for a moment that began with the Arab Spring and is still going strong. When the Occupy movement exploded, Morello was singing at protest sites and signing on with Lou Reed, Amanda Palmer and hundreds of other Occupy musicians.

MOST VALUABLE ECONOMIC NEWS SOURCE: Beat the Press

Want to understand the Federal Reserve? Want to know why people who are facing foreclosure should be allowed to rent their home? Want to make sense of the eurocrisis and why it matters to you? Beat the Press, economist Dean Baker's blog on the Center for Economic and Policy Research website (cepr.net), does not just have the answers to those questions. In 2011 his blog framed the debate to such an extent that media outlets, members of Congress and citizens came to rely on it as a resource and agenda-setting tool. Baker offered savvy perspectives on the fights over Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, as well as on issues like work sharing and a financial transactions tax. And he did it with perfect pitch, making sound economic arguments that activists could use.

MOST VALUABLE WEBSITE: Save the Post Office

Nowhere was the assault on public services more aggressive than in the push to downsize the

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

Postal Service. Battered by a Congressional mandate that pensions be prepaid for the next seventy-five years, the USPS announced plans to eliminate services, lay off tens of thousands of workers and close as many as 3,700 local offices. The American Postal Workers Union and the National Association of Letter Carriers stepped up to fight the cuts, making powerful arguments against the slide toward privatization. And Steve Hutkins's website, www.savethepo.com stoffice?.com

became an essential resource for a network of grassroots groups in all fifty states defending local post offices—along with the idea that the founders were right when they argued that a strong postal service does not just deliver mail; it builds communities and links them as a nation. Best of all, Save the Post Office has made smart arguments for expanding the USPS by doing things like renewing the old postal banking system.

MOST VALUABLE JURIST: District Judge Jed Rakoff

When Rakoff rejected the Securities and Exchange Commission's proposed \$285 million settlement with Citigroup over the sale of toxic mortgage debt, he sent a shock wave through the financial-services industry and the regulatory community. Rakoff excoriated the regulators for appearing to be uninterested in Citigroup's wrongdoing, dismissing the settlement as "neither reasonable, nor fair, nor adequate, nor in the public interest." This wasn't the first time Rakoff has scored the SEC for seeming to be more interested in grabbing headlines than in cracking down on corporate fraud; in 2009 he rejected a settlement that failed to address serious issues raised by Bank of America's takeover of Merrill Lynch. Rakoff has provided overwhelming evidence of why it is essential for judges to prevent regulators and corporations from cutting deals behind closed doors to avoid public trials, transparency and accountability.

MOST VALUABLE BOOK: Who's Afraid of Frances Fox Piven?

The only good thing that can be said about Glenn Beck is that his attacks on Piven reminded Americans of just how vital her contributions (often with her late husband, Richard Cloward) have been to American progress. Piven has always asked tough questions about the role that economic inequality, structural barriers and outright suppression play in limiting the democratic franchise. The distinguished professor of political science and sociology has, through research and advocacy, played a critical role in securing reforms like the 1993 "motor voter" law. Now that corporate interests are using groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council to undo a half-century of voting-rights progress, Piven's arguments are more important than ever. Who's Afraid of Frances Fox Piven?: The Essential Writings of the Professor Glenn Beck Loves to Hate

(New Press) highlights her brilliant contributions to debates about poverty, welfare, voting rights

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

and progressive reform.

MOST VALUABLE UNION: International Association of Fire Fighters

When GOP politicians attacked public sector unions, the response was overwhelming. The labor movement flexed muscles it had not exercised for years. Although labor did not win every battle, unions were back in the fight—and waging it with new sophistication and creativity. Leading the way was the IAFF. Firefighters were key players in one of labor's biggest wins in years: the Ohio referendum that overturned Governor Kasich's assault on collective-bargaining rights. And IAFF members taught a powerful lesson in solidarity when Wisconsin firefighters, exempted from Governor Walker's attack on collective bargaining, nonetheless joined AFSCME, AFT, NEA and other unions on the front lines of resistance. The IAFF's commitment and flexibility are exactly what unions need to build on the momentum of 2011.

MOST VALUABLE CAMPAIGN: Draft Elizabeth Warren

After President Obama decided not to fight to make Elizabeth Warren the head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the agency she had conceived and gotten off the ground, most of official Washington assumed she would return to Harvard and teach law. But the Progressive Change Campaign Committee and National Nurses United had another idea: they wanted Warren to run for the Senate from Massachusetts. The PCCC push, and an early endorsement from the nurses, created an old-fashioned draft campaign. And it worked. Warren announced her candidacy on September 14. She is now one of a quartet of Democratic women—which includes Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin, Hawaii's Mazie Hirono and North Dakota's Heidi Heitkamp—whose economic populist campaigns hold out the hope that the Senate could be occupied by servants of the people, instead of what Senator Robert La Follette once dismissed as "the feudal serfs of corporate capital."

MOST VALUABLE IDEA: Occupy Together

Of course, the *Adbusters* magazine call to Occupy Wall Street was a stroke of genius. And "99 Percent" was the perfect calculus. But what made the movement a movement was the concept that it could—and should—be everywhere. From Toledo to Des Moines to Pocatello to San Jose, Occupy groups sprang up, and all linked up on the brilliant, inspiring occupytogether?.org

Written by John Nichols | The Nation Wednesday, 21 December 2011 00:00

website. By the end of the year, the constantly updated hub was pointing millions of visitors to thousands of Occupy groups and to the message: "We Stand Together! We Will Advance Together! And We Will Occupy Together!"

Link to original article from The Nation