

Vermont People's Convention
Declaration of Human Rights
Burlington, Vermont - 2 September 2012

Introduction

We have gathered here as members of many communities in Vermont, North America and the world, to lay out a plan to work together for social justice. We are more than 400 individuals from every county of the state and other communities around the world, representing more than 40 organizations. Though diverse in our origins, ancestries, faiths and dispositions, as people we are united in our common humanness.

We hold as self-evident truths that intrinsic dignity inheres in every person, that it is the duty of a humane society to foster the ability of every person to flourish and achieve their full human potential and that it is the responsibility of every generation to preserve for their progeny an equivalent future.

We recognize that our human rights result from our human needs, and thus our human rights are fundamental, indivisible and unalienable.

We understand that no individual person can alone satisfy their human needs, and thus no individual can flourish and achieve their full human potential alone. We join together and form communities in order to secure and protect the human rights to which all are entitled. From these communities, political and economic systems arise, and to these systems we assign society's obligation to respect, protect and fulfill our human rights.

We have gathered as this people's convention because we see that existing political and economic systems are failing to satisfy their human rights obligations, and we are suffering.

Evidence of the failure of existing systems lies all around us in the forms of sickness, hunger, homelessness, poverty and the many other ways in which human needs are unmet in our communities.

Similarly, the widespread alteration and destruction of the natural environment, upon which all life depends, is harming the most vulnerable among us and jeopardizes the viability of future generations.

We recognize that the failure of existing political and economic systems is the result of their being structured to allow a few to amass wealth and power, rather than to promote the well-being of all. Public goods are privatized. Our needs and our labor are commoditized. The commons are pillaged for private gain. Discriminatory policing and mass incarceration serve the interests of the powerful rather than the ideals of justice. Violence is used here and abroad not as a defense of last resort but as a routine instrument of state policy, often in support of private gain.

We understand that unjust political and economic systems, if left unchanged, will continue to fail our communities, so we must reshape these systems around the fundamental goal of fulfilling the needs of the people of our communities. We must organize these systems in accordance with the human rights principles of universality, equity, participation, transparency and accountability. Every person must be able to enjoy all of their rights according to their needs. Every person must be able to participate in decisions that affect their rights. Every person must be able to hold those in power accountable to human rights standards.

We hold in our hearts a vision of true democracy. It is a vision of a society in which everyone enjoys a life of dignity, with healthcare, healthful food and a home in a healthy environment. It is a society in which everyone has an education that allows them to fulfill their potential and their desires, with meaningful work and adequate leisure. It is a society in which all decisions that affect our communities are made by and for the benefit of the people — a society which values the common good of this and future generations over private gains. Our vision of true democracy is a vision of a society in which the principal role of governments is to satisfy the needs of communities by respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights of every person.

We understand that we must infuse democracy into both our political and economic systems, in order to realize our vision of social justice. And we are prepared to overcome the many obstacles that lie in our way.

Those who hold power use their power to influence the way we frame the world in our minds. We understand that we must challenge many well-established myths, among which are assertions that ordinary people are not experts in their own lives and cannot manage their own futures, that corporations and their “free” markets are the source of all human progress, that governance impedes innovation and efficiency and that the resources necessary for the fulfillment of human needs are scarce and insufficient. These are falsehoods and must be rejected. Reason demands that we ground our judgment on true premises not on falsehoods.

Those who profit from existing political and economic systems offer us false solutions that serve only their interests. We must challenge false solutions such as elimination or privatization of public services, slashing of public investment, deregulation and technological solutions to problems that are social not technological.

Our culture of individualism often causes us to blame ourselves and each other for failures that are not personal but systemic. Misplaced shame can even discourage us from believing that we are entitled to our human rights. We must not fall prey to confusion but must work together to re-shape these failed systems around the shared values of our communities.

We have gathered during the course of a continuing community consultation process to deepen our understanding of the true nature of the different problems that we face, to see more clearly the different facets of the vision of justice that we embrace and to unify ourselves in the different actions that we must take. As we have joined together in our communities, so will we continue to join together in one movement, by engaging with each other to listen, to understand and to take action.

Against our struggle, those who hold power might seek to palliate and appease us, but we know that the structural causes of the crises we face remain. We know that, to achieve justice, we must identify and overcome the common root causes of these crises by joining our many struggles into one movement.

Here, in Vermont, we have gathered because we understand that power holders do not recognize our rights. Our rights must be won through struggle.

Our strength, like the strength of our communities, derives from solidarity among all people, which means that we recognize our shared humanity. Those who hold power use systems of oppression to divide us from each other, so that we do not recognize our shared humanity, so that we fight against our selves, so that we act out of fear and desperation, so that we do not see the real structural causes of the crises we face and so that we cannot work together for the well-being of all. The systems of oppression that divide us include racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, classism, heterosexism, religious intolerance and nationalism. False divisions like these weaken the bond of our true shared humanity, and we must undo them.

Experience has shown that social justice is achieved only by joining together in solidarity to build collective power, by making each of us a leader among leaders.

Therefore we have gathered here in Vermont with a shared vision of social justice and a strategy for accomplishing our goals, ready to engage in the work that we have to do.

Now, embracing our shared humanity, we commit ourselves to this unified struggle for our rights, and we call upon every person to join us in this one movement for people and our planet.

Principles

The basis of our human rights is the mutual respect that comes from recognition of our shared humanity. In order for each of us to flourish and fulfill our human potential, we must work together to ensure the ability of each of us to participate fully in all aspects of society, including our culture, our political systems and our economic systems.

Human rights exist outside of formal bodies of law. We are entitled to our human rights because we are human, not because of legislation, treaties, executive orders or other instruments of public policy. On the contrary, the fundamental and paramount purpose of public policy is to protect and fulfill human rights.

To guide us in realizing our vision of a society with human rights as its unifying core, we use the following principles and detailed frameworks derived from these principles.

In solidarity with allied groups across the country, we present these principles and the statement on public goods here in the form that was drafted by the Human Rights at Home campaign in February 2012.

UNIVERSALITY

Every person, individually and as part of their families and communities, is entitled to all their human rights. All policy, legal and administrative proposals for solutions to our economic and social problems must respect the universality of rights, and social systems ensuring rights must be designed to serve all people and all communities. When policies, programs and other measures to protect rights and meet people's needs are universal in nature, they create a broad set of stakeholders that ensure their integrity and sustainability. Selective and narrow solutions that serve one group in society at the expense of others can lead to stratification and division, and fall far short of a human rights vision. To enable universal enjoyment of human rights, all policies must intentionally contribute to relieving the disproportionate burden

carried by disadvantaged groups as a result of current or past discrimination and oppression.

EQUITY

In order to protect human rights, the distribution of society's resources must be based on meeting people's fundamental needs to ensure a dignified existence for all. Equity guarantees equality in the practical enjoyment and exercise of all human rights for all people and communities, in the United States and abroad. Thus, the principle of equity requires not only equality of opportunity across the board, but also equality of outcome with regard to the protection of basic rights, fulfillment of fundamental needs, and the dismantling and prevention of all forms of discrimination. To achieve equity, society should ensure that with regard to fundamental rights, including healthcare, education, housing and decent jobs, everyone contributes what they can, and gets what they need.

PARTICIPATION, TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

At the heart of a vision grounded in democracy and human rights is the principle of participation. Every person, family and community in society is entitled to fully participate and exercise power in the political, social and economic systems, institutions and processes that affect the realization of their rights.

Participation is not mere presence or voice, but rather requires that people be enabled and empowered to take part in shaping and influencing society and government. To achieve this aim, power itself must be structured in a way that is democratic, transparent and thus accountable to communities and the common good. Thus, all policies, programs, and practices relevant to human rights must be designed to meet the principles of accountability, transparency and participation. Collective structures must be developed to ensure that power rests with the people affected. As a necessary corollary, all obstacles to participation, such as unjust criminalization, disrespectful or undignified treatment, or other forms of discrimination, must be eliminated.

Public Goods

In order to meet principles of universality, equity and participation, we must ensure that the . . . services, goods and infrastructure necessary to realize people's basic rights and meet their fundamental needs are treated as public goods, not as commodities. These essential goods and services must be provided collectively, on an equitable basis, not according to exclusionary market imperatives. Thus, privatization of core public functions that affect the protection and exercise of human rights obligations is unacceptable as it undermines accountability to human rights principles and democratic participation. The provision of public goods must be shared by all and serve to meet everyone's needs, not make profit or for any other purpose. Communities must be involved in making decisions about the financing, management and distribution of public goods.

Indivisibility & Solidarity

As we struggle together to realize our shared vision, we understand that we can meet all of our human needs only by achieving all of our human rights. Further, we know that winning one right, or some rights, is not enough. Our rights depend on each other and cannot be separated. Without transportation to the hospital, for example, a universal healthcare system does not serve us equitably. To fully realize our rights in the food system, we must simultaneously have the right to dignified work, and the right to organize, along with the right to healthy food. And if we achieve each of our rights, but continue the relentless destruction of our earth, we will have failed to truly win human rights. Failing to connect our rights holistically would deny future generations their rights, and thus their ability to meet their human needs.

We assemble here to reaffirm that our struggles are connected. Those with the most power understand how dividing us amounts to defeating us. When we focus only on isolated issues and struggles, our important work suffers.

The Human Rights Crisis

We have gathered during the course of a continuing community consultation process, to deepen our understanding of the true nature of the different problems that we face, to see more clearly the different facets of the vision of justice that we embrace and to unify ourselves in the different actions that we must take.

What follows are some examples from the human rights crisis that we face in our communities. This information is the result of more than thirty community consultations involving hundreds of community leaders including disability rights advocates, self advocates, leaders of First Nation Abenaki communities, seniors, state employees, labor union leaders, early educators, teachers, people working on addiction and recovery, people working with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated communities, healthcare providers, farmers and small business owners, new American communities, climate justice activists, mobile home park residents, municipal workers, social workers, parents and advocates for children, migrant farm workers, women's rights leaders, veterans and people working on military issues.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO HEALTHCARE

We are unable to afford or access healthcare, which impacts our health and our ability to live with dignity. Healthcare costs cause bankruptcies and fuel ever-increasing poverty. Healthcare is not treated as a public good but sold in the private market to those who can afford it. Many of us must choose between food and healthcare. Marginalized people have particular problems getting the healthcare they need, which perpetuates their invisibility. Treatments for addiction and mental health are too expensive to afford. Our healthcare is a commodity by which corporations profit while we suffer and die.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO EDUCATION

We privatize parts of our education system, increasing cost and barring access. Education is not always treated as a public good. Tuition costs keep going up, and students are going bankrupt

from the loans they cannot pay when they are unable to find jobs. Lack of education fuels poverty, and poverty keeps us from becoming educated. Teachers are underpaid and undervalued. Early education is ignored. Individual needs are not met. Parts of our education system are a commodity which many cannot afford.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

An unhealthy environment is making our planet unlivable. Not all of us have access to clean air, water and soil. Our lack of concern for stewardship and conservation of the earth makes our access to fundamental needs like food and housing even more difficult. Sustainable energy systems are ignored in favor of those which further pollute the earth. Education about earth stewardship is not publicly available. Government spends public funds on war machinery that benefits only the economic elite and adds to the pollution of our environment. Privatization of non-sustainable energy sources fuels poverty and global warming.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WORK WITH DIGNITY

Workers are denied livable wages. Our dignity must be sacrificed to work for the small wages we get. We are denied the right to organize and subjected to wage theft by employers. Employers hold workers captive to health insurance needs. Workers are not hired and are sometimes fired based upon their race, citizenship, gender, age or disability. Long work hours are required to keep our jobs. Language barriers keep us from working and getting work. Workers must choose between food, housing or healthcare while large corporations dole out multi-million-dollar bonuses to executives.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO HOUSING

Housing is not recognized as a public good. There is no clear process for holding anyone accountable for the lack of housing. People of all ages are homeless because they cannot afford a place to live. Homelessness is a vicious cycle. People are losing their homes so that the banks can make a profit on their

suffering. Adequate public funding is not available to support emergency shelters. Children grow up without homes, and senior citizens are evicted and out on the streets. Accessible housing is not available to people with disabilities. People without homes are marginalized and not treated with respect and dignity. Homelessness fuels ill health and perpetuates poverty.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO SOCIAL SECURITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

People live in fear of homelessness, hunger and ill health. There is no economic security for anyone, especially for those already suffering with insufficient social security or general assistance. Lives are lived without dignity for lack of public funds spent on treatment, rehabilitation and accessibility. We do not have an adequate standard of living. Social services are the first thing cut in state budgets that allocate public funds. Cuts to social services fuel poverty, accelerate homelessness and treat human needs as commodities.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS TO MOBILITY AND FREEDOM TO TRAVEL

Only those with vehicles and driver's licenses have adequate transportation. Gas for cars is unaffordable and pollutes our environment. Public funds are not spent on accessible transportation systems. We cannot get to doctors, to work, to see family or even to our State capital for lack of public transportation systems. There are no safe and adequate routes for bicycle transportation. Transportation is totally privatized, not treated as a public good. Lack of transportation further fuels the suffering and disconnectedness of a rural society. Our inability to gather together prevents us from living dignified lives and participating in our democracy.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

Many children go to school hungry, and cannot focus on their education. Healthy and local foods are expensive and people cannot buy them. Foodstamps are cut leaving many without enough to eat. Choosing between food, medicines, rent and utilities is common in the senior community. Food system workers

toil in poverty, and some suffer from extreme dependency and oppressive isolation. Family farms are going bankrupt. Food workers and family farmers cannot access and afford healthy food. The food system is dependent on immigrant labor whose most fundamental human rights are denied. Family farmers are forced to get second jobs to access healthcare. Government programs subsidize environmentally destructive large-scale industrial agriculture, making food a global commodity and driving family farmers out of business. The food system puts profit over workers' and family farmers' human needs and dignity and fails to feed and sustain our communities.

CONCLUSION: ROOT CAUSES

The problems that constitute the current human rights crisis share root causes that live in the structures of the economic and political systems of our society. These malformed structures violate our human rights principles.

- **Lack of Universality:** Our society is competitive rather than cooperative, mirroring the rules of the market; we are divided — the focus is on “me”, not “us.” Essential goods and services have been commercialized and privatized in the pursuit of private gains, and people and the planet are being sacrificed.
- **Lack of Equity:** Wealth, resources and power are highly concentrated in the hands of a few, while many people and communities are severely marginalized and disadvantaged. This is justified by the myth of equal opportunity, which ignores that our economy, politics and culture are shaped by the forces of racism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression.
- **Lack of Participation, Transparency & Accountability:** There is a lack of accountability within the political process and a lack of participation by impacted people and communities. Government is unduly influenced by those with wealth and power, rather than committed to meeting its human rights obligations. This influence is reflected in budget and revenue policies, which are not accountable to human needs and rights.

Our Vision

We share a vision of a society that fosters the ability of every person to flourish and achieve their full human potential, a society in which all human needs are met. We see the problems in our communities as failures of the systems of society to satisfy human rights obligations. Our human rights principles help us identify these failures and point us toward systemic solutions. What follows are some of the changes in our political and economic systems that our vision demands.

ACHIEVING UNIVERSALITY

- Government must recognize and ensure that the human rights of all people and communities are realized, so that everyone is able to meet their fundamental needs.
- Our resources must be preserved and shared according to our needs and the needs of future generations, not according to profit interests. Government has to develop a budget that fully funds the public goods required to meet our needs.

ACHIEVING EQUITY

- We must democratize wealth and property ownership.
- We must develop new forms of work, beyond the wage labor system, and enable workers to make decisions about production.
- We need an equitable tax system that fully funds a needs-based budget.
- We must end poverty and eliminate unjust income and wealth disparities.

ACHIEVING PARTICIPATION, TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

- Government needs to facilitate community participation in decision making; government policies and representatives' actions must be accountable to community needs.

- The people have to control and manage our resources collectively as public goods, not for private gain, and for the benefit of future generations.

A People's Agenda

STRATEGY

We have a strategy, and we believe that with it we can accomplish the change that we envision.

- We will build and strengthen our base, by reaching new people and deepening relationships we already have.
- We will educate ourselves and make each of us a leader among leaders.
- We will tell our own stories.
- We will fund our own movement, so that we are accountable to each other.
- We will use a human rights framework, in both our organizing and our policy development, to unify our struggles.
- We will connect our struggles globally, in mutual solidarity.
- We will hold those in power accountable to us.

IMMEDIATE EFFORTS

During this People's Convention we have gathered as a unified community to advocate for our human rights. This gathering is one step in our journey towards full realization of our shared vision. Though we arrived with different goals in mind, we discovered our common need to address the root causes of the challenges we face. Moving forward, we will actively support each others' work so we progress as one people standing together for the greater good of all.

In Vermont, allied organizations have already begun acting together to build power around a set of unified demands on our

legislature. For 2013, these demands, conveyed by means of thousands of signed postcards to be delivered to our representatives in the statehouse, are:

Create a universal, publicly financed healthcare system that satisfies the human rights principles incorporated into Act 48, so that every Vermont resident receives the care they need when they need it.

Adopt a people's budget, grounded in human rights principles, with equitable spending and revenue policies, that meets the fundamental needs of everyone in Vermont.

Take all necessary action to design and implement real solutions to the climate crisis, and ensure that everyone in Vermont has a healthy environment and a livable planet.

Support the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively, and foster the development of an economy in which income and wealth are distributed equitably, an economy in which the majority do not suffer for the benefit of the rich.

Around the country, organizations are joining together in the *Human Rights at Home* campaign, an effort grounded in the historic struggles of communities. We join and build this movement with our efforts here in Vermont.

BUILDING THE STRUCTURES FOR ACCOMPLISHING THE PEOPLE'S AGENDA

Around the world, people and nations have recognized the importance of human rights as a fundamental part of social justice. Towards this end, our work in Vermont will continue as we complete this draft declaration by incorporating the input received during this people's convention.

When this declaration is finished, it will serve to guide our collective effort to achieve meaningful change. It will also function as a living document, in that it will be continually improved through ongoing reflection and periodic revision.

Through continuing community consultations, ongoing revisions of this document and regularly convening people's conventions, we will grow Vermont's human rights movement to achieve our vision of a better future.

The need to hold governments accountable to their human rights obligations has led to the creation of processes and bodies around the world that are specifically tasked with monitoring and overseeing how governments comply with the legal frameworks they create to uphold these obligations. Moving forward, we will establish a Vermont People's Human Rights Council to assess both the state of human rights in our communities and our campaigns' abilities to implement our strategy.

It is not enough that we identify and classify the problems that we face in our communities. Nor is it enough that we come together and share our vision of the fulfillment of our human rights. Nor is it even enough that we have a strategy with which we can secure our human rights. We must also have the means to execute this strategy, so that every ingredient of our recipe is available to all of our campaigns. By means of an ongoing People's Human Rights Council, we can fully develop our People's Agenda, create effective campaigns and achieve our ultimate goals.