

Life in the Amazon: Community Activism and CSR

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One Wednesday, October 20, Arlington Public Schools in Arlington, Virginia announced that Amazon is going to build a permanent home for Arlington Community High School (ACHS). According to the announcement, "ACHS has never had a permanent home in the County—moving around to locations that were not ideally located or tailored to meet the needs of ACHS students." ACHS serves an adult, overwhelmingly immigrant and people of color student population. "In the 2020-21 school year, 79% of ACHS students were Hispanic, 8% were Asian, 7% were Black, and 5% were White. More than 80% of students were enrolled in the English Learner program and more than 35% qualified as economically disadvantaged." (Arlington Public Schools, 2021, October 20). Having been active for many years in the community struggle to support and defend the school, including supporting a campaign in 2014 to keep the school from being closed (Elkner, J., 2014, January), I was overjoyed that ACHS would finally get a permanent home. The fact that it required the direct intervention of the world's fifth largest corporation, worth 1.8 trillion dollars (Ventura, L., 2021, August 3), headed by the world's second richest man (Ang, C., 2021, September 28), is deeply troubling however, as it raises serious questions about the nature of democracy in the twenty-first century United States, at the same time it highlights a clear attempt at corporate social responsibility (CSR) by Amazon.

Amazon's support of ACHS aligns well with other initiatives the mega-giant corporation has been taking to endear itself to the liberal, heavily Democratic community in which its HQ2 is now located, such as the donation of land near the future site of

ACHS to Arlington County for affordable housing (Armus, T., 2021, July 13). These gestures are in turn part of its broader, company-wide corporate social responsibility initiative (Armus, T., 2021, July 13). It seems apparent to me that Amazon's CSR campaign is effective. I have had several informal conversations with members of the Arlington County Board who, knowing I was part of the stop Amazon campaign, went out of their way to insist that Amazon is indeed being a good corporate citizen.

Yet as Joel Bakan well documents in *The New Corporation: How "Good" Corporations Are Bad for Democracy*, "corporations can only do such *good* as will help them do *well* - a profound limit on how (and how much) good they do. And even worse, an obfuscation of their predilection to do *bad*" (2019, p. 185). The fundamental problem with the whole CSR initiative is that it is at its root a marketing campaign designed to give a fresh image to corporations whose bottom line is still the bottom line, profit.

The SDG Academy Library, an organization connected with the United Nations' sustainable development goals, put out a video titled *Corporate Social Responsibility in the Water Sector* that I found quite interesting. At just under three minutes into the video, host Emilio Guzman presents what he calls the "three main pillars" of corporate social responsibility, or the "triple bottom-line", profit, planet, and people. He lists these three pillars in that order, and there is a noticeable increase in volume and emphasis when he says "profit", with the other two said in a much quieter, more subdued voice, so as not to offend the corporate audience at whom I presume this video is aimed (SDG Academy Library, 2019, August 23).

The only way to avert social and environmental catastrophe, however, is to bring about a new set of economic and social relationships that put people and planet before profit. So-called corporate social responsibility will never do that, and those of us who truly care about people and the planet need to make that perfectly clear at every opportunity.

As to the question of what community activists living in the heart of Amazonia should do regarding our new corporate behemoth neighbor and its successful attempts to woo liberal politicians with CSR initiatives, I think the answer is also perfectly clear. We need to understand that it is fundamentally the threat of democracy and people's united action that led Amazon to offer financial support for a school and housing serving our low income residents in the first place, and we need to press forward with our demands until we can make the fears of the super rich about the anger of the people over the ever growing income inequality that separates us from them into a reality. The only way corporations will ever be truly socially responsible is when we the people gain the will and political power to make them be socially responsible.

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