



Top 10 Youth Activism Victories in 2007

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Anyone who laments that American young people are apathetic, uninvolved or not sufficiently outraged clearly isn't up on the news.

Luckily, though, we are. The past 12 months have been filled with many great youth organizing successes; some were covered extensively by mainstream media, and some went -- sadly -- unnoticed. From these extraordinary stories, Wiretap has culled a list of our favorite 10 youth victories of the year. They're not just the events you've heard about, like the hunger strikes at Harvard and Stanford, because the less-attended actions of low-income, low-profile youth groups can be equally triumphant. And they're not just acts of campus activism, either -- because half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 are not enrolled in college. And though there are countless other examples of protest, cooperation, and informed dissent that went on and are still continuing around the country, here are 10 especially inspirational stories that went down this year. Congratulations to these and all other young people who took responsibility and took charge in 2007 to work hard both with their peers and with other groups, who put their energies into action for their communities, and for the world.

Environmental Activism: Stepping It Up



It's time to go way beyond just switching light bulbs to fight global warming, and this year young people from all over the country proved their commitment to the planet. In February, nearly 600 student groups staged events during the Campus Climate Challenge Week of Action. But activists were just getting started, and college campuses were barely the starting point. On April 14, Step It Up -- the brainchild of a group of young people and environmentalist and author Bill McKibben -- brought people together at 1,400 locations nationwide demanding that Congress cut carbon emissions 80 percent by 2050. It was such a success that organizers kicked off Step It Up 2 just seven months later and got 14,000 messages sent to Congress and presidential candidates, 80 of whom sent statements or

representatives or showed up at events. That same month, at Power Shift 2007, 5,500 young activists from across the country got together at the University of Maryland College Park to make Congress change its colors. Over four days in November, participants staged a rally on the Capitol and held more than 300 lobbying meetings to pressure congresspeople to provide more green jobs and greener policies for a greener, brighter, more sustainable future.

Shutting Toxic Things Down

In a more local, but just as important, triumph for the environment, the members of Youth United for Community Action, an organization created and run by youths of color ages 13-30 in the Bay Area, became heroes of their neighborhood and role models for grassroots organizers nationwide when California granted their wish to shut down a hazardous-waste-handling company that had been plaguing the vicinity for more than four decades. YUCA worked to rid its community of Romic Environmental Technologies Corporation, which had been fined ([pdf](#)) for multiple hazardous-waste violations by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control, for 16 years. Now that the state issued the order that Romic close most of its East Palo Alto operations, YUCA and its constituents can breathe a little easier -- and much more safely.

Preserving Community Land and Culture



In another major local victory for the environment, Save the Peaks, a coalition formed to protect the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, won a court order that defended the sacred site. For years, the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort has operated on this traditionally holy ground, and in 2004 the U.S. Forest Service approved the company's plans to expand -- which included cutting down 74 acres of trees and using treated sewage water to make artificial snow. The plans posed a threat to the ecosystem, the health of surrounding communities, and the religious freedom of the 13 Native American Nations that hold the mountains hallowed. The Youth of the Peaks worked together with the coalition, protesting at the foot of the resort to let tourists know the issues surrounding the grounds they're playing on. In March, the 9th Circuit Court ruled that the expansion plans be stopped.

On October 17th, the court granted Arizona Snowbowl and the U.S. Forest Service an appeal, which was heard on December 11th. Far from giving up, tribes and young activists in the coalition attended the case, and are encouraging others to take action as well while the community waits for a decision.

Elementary Education Nation

American schools are in deep trouble. More than half of black students in Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania attend high schools in which the majority of students do not graduate. Nearly 40 percent of Latino students and 11 percent of white students drop out of high school ([pdf](#)).



Tired of waiting for politicians and philanthropists, who have pledged for decades to reform education, high school students worked diligently to improve their own schools in 2007. From [Urban Youth Collaborative](#) and [DRUM](#) in New York, to [Rethinkers](#) in New Orleans, to [Youth for Justice](#) in Los Angeles, youths across the country organized around everything from violence prevention to building eco-friendly, clean bathrooms. The [Detroit Summer Collective](#) is an especially innovative, all-volunteer-run program. In addition to making a [documentary](#) in 2007 that looks at the root causes and student-driven solutions to the high drop-out rates, the Collective is transforming the entire city of Detroit by teaching young people how to maintain organic gardens and sell produce to their communities, as well as organizing monthly [city pot lucks](#) that act as interracial and intergenerational town halls. A democracy can't thrive without informed citizens, and if the world's wealthiest and most powerful one won't provide a decent K-12 education, these students will bring their communities together to do it.

Higher Education for the Masses, for Real



Another crucial tool for social mobility in the United States, is access to college. According to the [Public Policy Institute of California](#), 42 percent of Asians and 40 percent of whites think that the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so. Why did 82 percent of Latinos and 75 percent of blacks say no? Probably in part because college tuition has been ever [increasing](#) and throwing [more students](#) into [debt](#). Which is why the passing of the [College Cost](#)

Reduction and Access Act, the most significant tuition reform bill in 15 years, was an incredible achievement. Students nationwide brought the issue to the attention of both the media and their peers, and worked closely with politicians in swing districts. For two years, PIRG and United States Student Association have been mobilizing to get college affordability on the congressional agenda. PIRG's Raid on Student Aid campaign generated more than 10,000 phone calls, in addition to lobbying meetings and emails. The very fact that students were vital to getting the legislation passed shows how important they are for change, and now the Act will help generate even more students. Says PIRG's Luke Swarthout, "Without the work of students over the past two years, Congress probably wouldn't prioritize legislation like the College Affordability and Access Act."

Students in Maine scored two victories this year, when their state legislators voted unanimously to approve a citizen ballot initiative that will provide a tax credit to all graduates to offset their student loan repayment as long as they stay in Maine. The League of Young Voters worked with hundreds of volunteers to gather 73,000 signatures that helped get this unprecedented measure passed.

Freeing the Jena 6

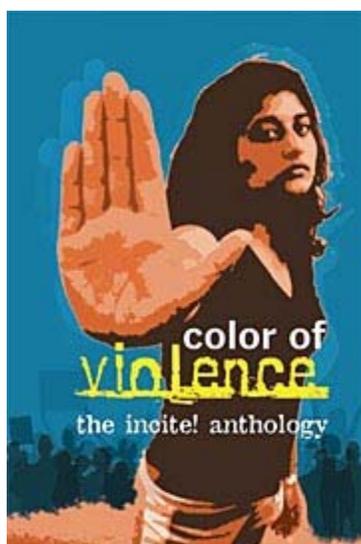
The day after a few courageous black students at Jena High School in Louisiana sat under a campus tree traditionally claimed by white students, two nooses were dangling from it. When white youths assaulted black students later that year, they were tried as juveniles and got away with a slap on the wrist. But when black students retaliated, the district attorney tried the six 15- to 17-year-olds as adults and charged them with attempted second-degree murder, for which each potentially faced more than 20 years in prison.



A year later, despite mainstream media silence, this story burst into national prominence thanks to the most massive civil-rights-movement mobilization since the '60s when over 10,000 college students, activists, and hip-hop artists converged on Jena. Thousands of youths in Jena and students on campuses nationwide protested a case that epitomized a long-standing history of unfair sentencing of people of color in America. The U.S. has the highest absolute, per-capita, and juvenile rate of incarceration in the world, with a tenth of all black men between ages 20 and 35 in jail or prison. The Jena 6 defense campaign mobilized millions of socially conscious youth, who represent the future leaders in the fight against the persistence of subtle and not-so-subtle racism in America. This massive, grassroots-driven campaign helped overturn the original sentences of the Jena 6, momentum that could be used to help thousands of other youths of color in America who were tried in the same, broken system to attain justice and re-enter their

communities.

Filling Health Care Needs, Post-Katrina



In 2005, Shana Griffin and the other members of the New Orleans Women's Health and Justice Initiative thought it would be easy to raise money for a women's health clinic post-Katrina. The devastated city -- with few cops, lots of strangers, staggering crime, and limited care -- was far from an ideally safe environment for women. "But we got a reality check," she says; donations were far from pouring in. So the Initiative worked together with INCITE, a national activist organization of women of color against violence, many of whose members are under 30, meeting up four times a week. The women, who had no experience running a clinic, pooled and applied their applicable respective skills and secured and renovated a space, learned everything they could about the logistics of providing health care, put out calls for and coordinated volunteers, and raised funds. Just a year and a half after the idea was conceived, and "through hard work and sweat," on May 1, 2007, the New Orleans Women's Health Clinic opened. A group of paid staff and volunteers provides everything from prenatal care to reproductive health, sex health, and routine preventative health services four days a week. And the women who labored to provide the much-needed assistance to their peers are working hard to keep it that way.

Fairer Immigrant Wages? Lovin' It.

Two years of organizing and protesting finally paid off in April for the Student/Farmworker Alliance, which, in partnership with the immigrant-laborer-led Coalition of Immokalee Workers, finally achieved results from its long-standing boycott against McDonald's. The company agreed to pay an extra penny per pound to its tomato suppliers, nearly doubling the wages of the impoverished pickers in Florida. A month later, the parent company of Taco Bell, which struck a similar deal with the activists in 2005 after four years of their perseverance, announced that it would expand the agreement to its four other chains, including Pizza Hut and A&W.

Thanks to some long, tireless efforts, some of the country's biggest fast-food chains have improved their wage standards. But despite an amazingly successful year, the SFA and CIW aren't about to take a break now: They're still hard at work on getting

Burger King to join the much-needed movement.

Anti-War Mobilization: Just Say "Hell No"



First, the 29-year-old Army Lt. Ehren Watada -- who was willing to serve in Afghanistan or any other conflict he didn't consider so morally and politically unconscionable -- refused to deploy to Iraq; his actions subsequently inspired increasing numbers of soldiers to mobilize for an end of the war in Iraq. Then, on Friday, November 16th, the Youth Against War and Racism called for a high school walkout. More than 1,000 students from the Puget Sound area alone left their classes that morning to protest the war and a problem even closer to the students: military recruiters in schools. Participating in the walkout were more than 125 students from Foster High School in Tukwila district, Washington, where military recruiters prey on students, 71 percent of whom are from low-income families. When several Foster teachers who supported the protest were threatened with disciplinary action, students rallied to their support; ultimately, teachers weren't punished. Though many expect youths, especially low-income, to support and even fight in the war, they proved this year, once again, that they are not going to take it sitting down.

Don't Forget Darfur



Three years after the United States classified the situation in Darfur, Sudan, as a genocide, students are still organizing to make sure the crucial cause doesn't get ignored. In April, two thousand white-clad activists played dead in Boston Commons for five minutes of silence. In December, thousands of students worldwide fasted to raise money to fight rape in the African region. STAND, a student anti-genocide coalition, helped organize those events and hundreds of others this year. Students have been signing petitions, lobbying representatives, staging events -- anything to keep Darfur in the news. And the coverage has paid off. Companies have started divesting in ventures that support the government that allows the genocide to continue, and awareness is at an all-time high. As long as the

violence rages, so will the activism. "The world has been slow to act to protect the people of Darfur," said STAND student director Scott Warren, "so students across the globe will be taking protection into their own hands."

Here's to anticipation for what a new generation of young activists will accomplish in 2008.

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