



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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U.S. AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) demands access to drugs, 1987-89

March

1987

to: September

1989

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *New York City, New York*

Goals:

From Wall St Flier, 1987:

“1. Immediate release by the Federal Food & Drug Administration of drugs that might help save our lives. These drugs include: Ribavirin (ICN Pharmaceuticals); Ampligen (HMR Research Co.); Glucan (Tulane University School of Medicine); DTC (Merieux); DDC (Hoffman-LaRoche); AS 101 (National Patent Development Corp.); MTP-PE (Ciba-Geigy); AL 721 (Praxis Pharmaceuticals).

2. Immediate abolishment of cruel double-blind studies wherein some get the new drugs and some don't.

3. Immediate release of these drugs to everyone with AIDS or ARC.

4. Immediate availability of these drugs at affordable prices. Curb your greed!

5. Immediate massive public education to stop the spread of AIDS.

6. Immediate policy to prohibit discrimination in AIDS treatment, insurance, employment, housing.

7. Immediate establishment of a coordinated, comprehensive, and compassionate national policy on AIDS.”

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 025. Displays of portraits › effigy
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 138. Sitdown
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 034. Vigils

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 177. Speak-in

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- AIDS sufferers and allies

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Larry Kramer and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) New York

Partners:

Other ACT-UP chapters across the country

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:**Groups in 2nd Segment:****Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:****Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

Joining order not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Burroughs-Wellcome pharmaceutical company

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Some protestors were brutalized by the police during arrest

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Though it didn't achieve some of its loftier goals, ACT-UP is credited by many for the subsidized availability of AIDS treatments today, and the amount of public support and funding there is for sufferers. They also saw the completion of most of their concrete demands, such as a 25% price reduction of AZT.

ACT UP still exists today.

Chapters sprung up across the country.

In 1987, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was still localized to urban centers, most notably gay men in New York City (NYC). Despite thousands of sufferers within NYC, little city public health or housing funding was devoted to the population. Nonprofits that served sufferers attempted to provide palliative care, but did little in terms of advocacy or lobbying.

In early 1987 Larry Kramer gave an impassioned speech at New York's Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center about the apathy he saw in response to the devastation that HIV/AIDS was wreaking on the gay community. Frustrated with the lack of progress in terms of public support systems for AIDS patients, he called for a new organization. Two days later, 300 people attended the first meeting of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. On March 17, it was announced that the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had approved the anti-viral drug azidothymidine (AZT) for the treatment of AIDS, just two years after it entered the bureaucratic approval process, as opposed to the typical 8-10 for a drug of its class. None of the other drugs in development to fight AIDS were given this same speedup. Later that day, pharmaceutical company Burroughs-Wellcome announced that it had been granted a monopoly on the drug's patent, and its cost would be upwards of \$10,000 for a single patient annually, making it the costliest drug ever.

On March 24, 1987, 250 members of ACT-UP arrived on Wall St in Manhattan at 7am, and began to protest. Waving signs, including the historic slogan "SILENCE = DEATH," and chanting "Act Up, Fight AIDS!", they called attention to the inequitable alliance between the FDA and Burroughs-Wellcome. An effigy of the FDA commissioner, Frank Young, was hung. As the day progressed, the protestors sat in the street, stopping traffic and leading to 17 arrests. Several weeks later, the FDA announced the speedup of other AIDS-fighting drugs, and many groups credited ACT-UP.

ACT-UP's major focus between 1987 and 1989, as reflected in their goals, was getting "drugs into bodies," or spreading effective treatment as quickly and cheaply as possible. With that goal in mind, they held a vigil at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital between July 21 and July 24, 1987, to honor its AIDS Treatment Evaluation Unit (ATEU), and call attention to the fact that it had only 31 patients, and did not produce significant results. This vigil led to the investigation of the ATEUs by New York congressman Theodore Weiss, and the subsequent admission by the chief of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases that the ATEUs weren't working, partially because of year-long staff shortages.

On March 24, 1988, the first anniversary of their initial Wall St protest, ACT-UP, having gained much international media attention in the previous year, protested once more. Through a series of better-coordinated waves of obstruction, protestors managed to stop traffic along Wall St for several hours, until 111 people were arrested for obstruction. This protest, much like the first one, called attention to the industry being formed around AIDS drugs, especially the FDA's collaboration with Burroughs-Wellcome to price gouge AZT, the only option for patients suffering from AIDS, because of a lack of other drugs on the market.

On October 11, 1988, at the FDA Headquarters in Rockville, Maryland, hundreds of ACT-UP activists, and their allied groups across the country attempted to enter the FDA, and were prevented by police. ACT-UP proceeded to cover much of the building with graphics and banners, many of which were broadcast on television that night. A variety of costumes illustrated the diversity of people effected by and fighting against AIDS.

After devoting significant time and energy to other issues affecting AIDS patients, such as a lack of housing in New York City and the denial of civil rights, ACT-UP returned to the issue of drug availability and pricing on April 25, 1989. Four activists from an ACT-UP sub-group called Power Tools entered the offices of Burroughs-Wellcome, and used steel plates to seal themselves inside an office. There, they telephoned the press, and stated their demand of a price reduction for AZT of at least 25%, and cost subsidies for low-income people.

In early September, the FDA announced that AZT, previously used only to treat patients with AIDS, could delay the onset of AIDS in patients with HIV. Demand for the drug vastly increased as sufferers of HIV sought it out. The stock of Burroughs-

Wellcome increased by 40%, and they refused to lower the cost of the drug. On September 5, members of ACT-UP met with Burroughs-Wellcome, and requested that they lower the price of the drug, and they continued to refuse.

On September 14, 1989, seven members of Power Tools entered the New York Stock Exchange using faked credentials. Five of them entered the VIP balcony overlooking the trading floor, chained themselves to it and unfurled a banner that said "SELL WELLCOME." As the stock exchange began to function for the morning, the protestors sounded marine foghorns that drowned out the traders, leading to a five minute pause in trading. About an hour after the chained protestors were removed and arrested, 1,500 protestors arrived to cause pandemonium at the Stock Exchange. As they sounded foghorns, the protestors handed out pamphlets explaining Burroughs-Wellcome's monopoly on AZT, and imploring traders to sell the stock. Several days later, Burroughs Wellcome announced a 20% reduction in price, to just over \$6,000 per year.

After the reduction, ACT-UP shifted its focus to other issues related to AIDS, but this victory was a great one -- it established the voices of people with HIV/AIDS as legitimate in discourse about their standards of care. In addition, it established AIDS activism as a legitimate field, making it easier to gain victories and recognition in the future. ACT-UP continued to be highly active throughout the 1990s.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

ACT-UP carried out a series of semi-decentralized campaigns across the United States beginning in 1987 and continuing through today. Their campaign for drug accessibility is one of several they carried out during the same time period of 1987-1989.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (10/09/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hanna King, 06/12/2010

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