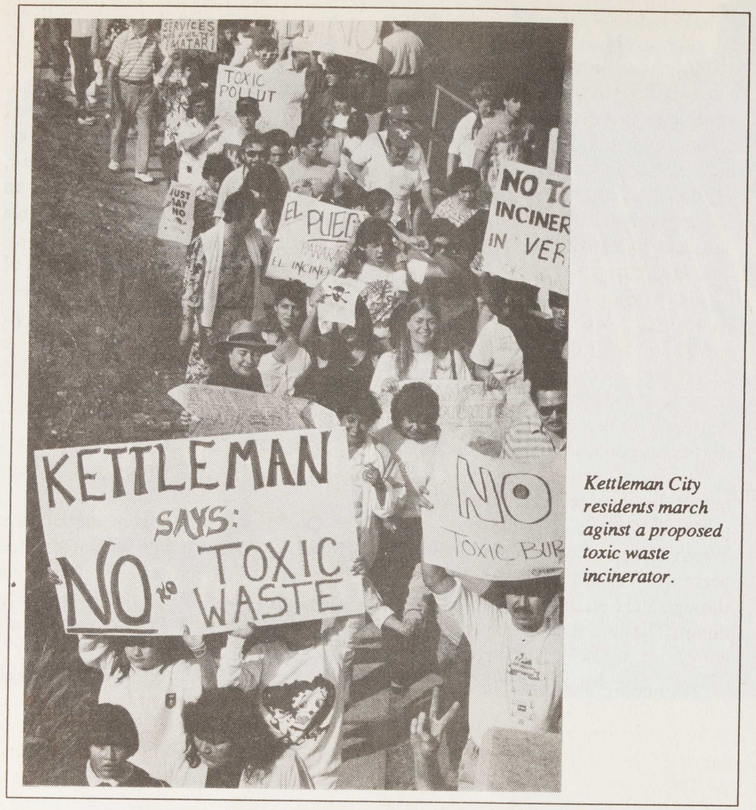


Kettleman City residents march aginst a proposed toxic waste incinerator.

limit input from Kettleman City by holding the hearing forty miles away in Hanford, *El Pueblo* turned out over 150 Kettleman residents.

To undermine the impact of *El Pueblo*'s contingent, county officials moved the site of their regular public hearing from the court house to the fields of the county fairgrounds. *El Pueblo*, members, whoever, were not deterred.

As residents alighted from the buses and looked up at the stage, they heard an official say that all Spanish-speaking people should step to the back. "We shouted, 'Adelante!'" beams Ausencio Avila, a 73-year-old member of *El Pueblo*, "and we went to the front." The county proceeded to hold the hearing in English-only, with selective un-amplified translation in the back of the gathering.

A Tradition of Organizing

The impetus to organize Kettleman City residents came from several sources. A few community members had the vision and the dedication to believe they could fight Chem Waste and win, there is a strong tradition of farmworker political organizing in the area, and outside organizations such as Greenpeace provided key information. As the residents would learn, however, working with outside organizations had its drawbacks, although on balance the advantages were probably greater.

To some extent, leadership development has occurred among community members themselves. Mary Lou Mares credits Espy Maya for building her confidence. After spending the last twenty years raising her family and working in the tomato fields surrounding Kettleman City, Mares is now the focal point of the grassroots struggle. "If you had told me two years ago that I would be going on TV or challenging Kings County officials, I never would have believed you," she laughs.

Ideas for Actions

El Pueblo's coalition members, such as Greenpeace, Berkeley's Technical Assistance Project (TAP) and Citizen Action, who were roused to join the struggle against Chem Waste in the beginning stages, believe, as Greenpeace's Bradley Angel puts it, that within *El Pueblo* "natural leadership developed from being involved." But the leaders themselves reveal a need for guidance. "I've had these ideas for actions," Mary Lou Mares admitted at a recent coalition meeting, "but being new at this I wasn't always quite sure how to go about it."

One reason residents might have these "ideas for actions" in their heads in the first place might be because of the rich political history of united struggle in the San Joaquin Valley. There are many former United Farm Worker (U.F.W.) organizers in *El Pueblo*, and the entire town seems to have been affected by UFW drives to organize farmworkers in other campaigns. "The local park was always a central place for political events," remembers Magdalena Avila, daughter of an *El Pueblo* member. "The organizing potential has always been there."

With the complex players and histories, it has been an educational process for Greenpeace and other coalition members to find the appropriate niche. With the most resources and the biggest name, Greenpeace plays a particularly sensitive role in this case. Aware that they might step on toes sometimes, Greenpeace organizers are caught between trying to move the campaign and being respectful of the community's self-determined goals. While they first alerted the community to the proposed incinerator, they now have to be wary of top-down approaches. "It's the community that has the ultimate decision," Greenpeace organizer Bradley Angel reminds himself.

The Campaign Escalates

Working in tandem with a growing coalition, *El Pueblo* was able to turn the heat up a notch. Luke Cole of the California Rural Assistance League (CRLA) Foundation brought in TAP, the outreach wing of graduate students of color at Berkeley's School of Public Health, to study the Environmental Impact Report, critique it and translate it for the community. Using house and community meetings, *El Pueblo* rapidly organized a letter-writing campaign in which more than 120 Kettleman residents wrote comments — in Spanish — on the Environmental Impact Report during what was left of a brief 30-day response period. Kings County, continuing its exclusion of Spanish-speakers, responded to the comments in English.

El Pueblo held several demonstrations outside Chem Waste's existing toxic waste dump site. Then, with the help of Greenpeace, they were able to shut down the facility for a day in November 1990 to call attention to their community's struggle.

Though they prevented 200 twenty-ton trucks from leaving their deadly loads on that day, residents still faced the potential threat of 7000 pounds of unburned chemicals that would be released into the air every year by even the best incinerator. When an incinerator burns toxic wastes, new chemicals like dioxins and PCBs are formed that are often more dangerous than the original wastes. Additionally, according to two new Greenpeace studies, eighty percent of hazardous waste incinerators nationwide have experienced explosions, fires and illegal venting of unburned chemicals, including an explosion at a Chicago Chem Waste incinerator only last February.

Even without the presence of incinerators spewing chemicals, Kettleman City residents' health is at risk. An *El Pueblo* health survey only half-complete has already revealed an inordinately high incidence of bronchitis and asthma-related illnesses among Kettleman residents.

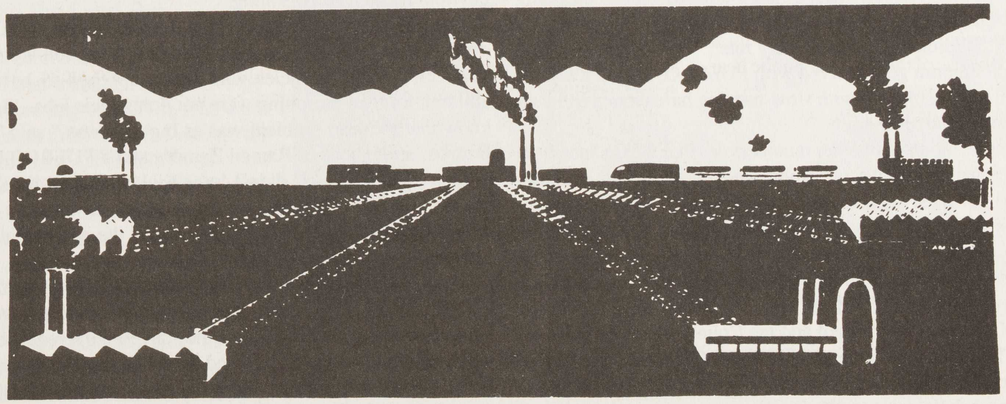
Profits often take precedence over health, however, especially when those profiting don't live by the site. Chem Waste currently contributes over eight percent of the County's annual revenue through a tax on the existing toxic waste dump. The new incinerator is expected to earn as much as $70 million a year. "County officials have a major conflict of interest here - if their salaries are paid by Chem Waste, how can they act in the public interest?" asked Ralph Santiago Abascal of CRLA.

To pressure the county, *El Pueblo* effectively turned the anti-incinerator battle into a San Joaquin Valley-wide issue. Working with Citizen Action of Fresno, *El Pueblo* helped to get local government bodies in other counties to oppose the incinerator. Both the Fresno City Council and the Visalia City Council passed resolutions opposing the toxic incinerator, showing that public officials without an economic stake in the decision would vote to secure the public's health and safety.

El Pueblo demanded the same sort of integrity and responsibility from their legislators. But on January 3, 1991, Kings County Board of Supervisors voted to approve Chem Waste's permit to build the incinerator.

Environmental Racism: Chem Waste & King's County

On February 7, following the county's decision, *El Pueblo* with legal assistance from CRLA, brought a major civil-rights suit against Chem Waste and Kings County charging them with "environmental racism."

"Chem Waste targets communities like ours all over this country," said Mary Lou Mares. The company's three other incinerators are located in poor, African-American neighborhoods - Chicago's

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