C'mon, Oakland Get the Lead Out!

Three MAAP interns — Peter Lin, Wei-Ling Huber and Niru Somasundaram —joined the Campaign for Accessible Health Care (CAHC) in Oakland this summe working on the issue of lead contamination and lead poisoning.

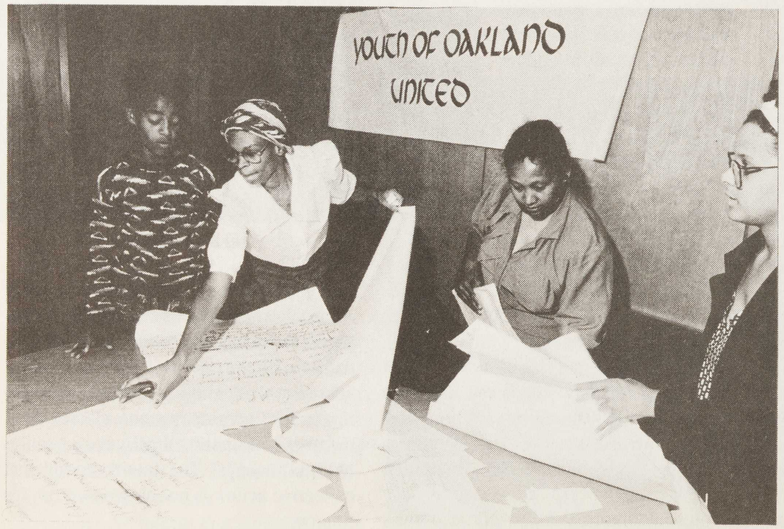
The summer started with an accountability session on June 21st. At the meeting, CAHC members directly confronted Lynn Goldman, Chief of Environmental Epidemiology and Toxicology for the California Department of Health Services, who had been responsible for a 1988 state study proving lead is a deadly problem in Oakland, and Rafat Shahid, Alameda County Director of Hazardous Waste Management, who would be ultimately responsible for cleaning up the lead.

Although the event was initially successful, as both targets agreed to nearly all of the groups demands, follow-up meetings later in the week proved that lead poisoning in the community was not a priority for these government bureaucrats. In a meeting with Goldman, CAHC members were told they would not get a map showing the contaminated blocks as promised, but would get a map showing only contaminated neighborhoods, vaguely delineated by major roads.

In another meeting, Shahid's staff said they would test only one site. After a two-hour fight, the CAHC got the county to agree to test at least five sites, but it was not enough. CAHC members knew that children were playing everyday in contaminated areas and ingesting lead that could cause irreparable damage to their health. They were furious that the state and county had known for two years that lead was killing the community and had done absolutely nothing about it. The community was not going to wait any longer.

On Tuesday, July 17th, a groups of seventy protesters, including twenty-five children, stormed the office of David Kears, Director of the Alameda County Health Services, to express their anger. The group, armed with pails of soil from local parks, school yards and other public areas, went to demand that their neighborhoods be tested for and ridded of lead contamination. By the end of the day, Kears announced publicly that by October he would test all thirty public areas where children play, plus 1000 more sites. In addition, he agreed to test 3000 children for blood poisoning.

The CAHC celebrated Kears' annoncement as a major victory, but didn't stop there. Inspired by their success, the CAHC moved on to the issue of blood testing for lead. On July 24th, nearly two dozen children (and their parents) jammed the emergency room at Children's Hospital to make sure the county was going to follow through on their promise to test. After attempting to stall the group for half an hour with a lot of "I'm-on-your-side, **BUT**s...," the frazzled hospital officials agreed to test all twenty kids on the spot.



The organization ended the summer with a July 28 accountability session. The session was intended to solicit support from the mayoral candidates on a variety of proposals around childcare, education, youth and health issues, including a stronger lead ordinance in the City of Oakland. Although only one of the two candidates, Wilson Riles, showed up, he agreed to most of the group's demands. Also, at the same meeting, the CAHC had the opportunity to publicly unveil their new multi-issue organization, PUEBLO (People United for a Better Oakland).

Each of the three MAAP interns came with one or two important skills or experiences that, in combination with the abilities of the other interns

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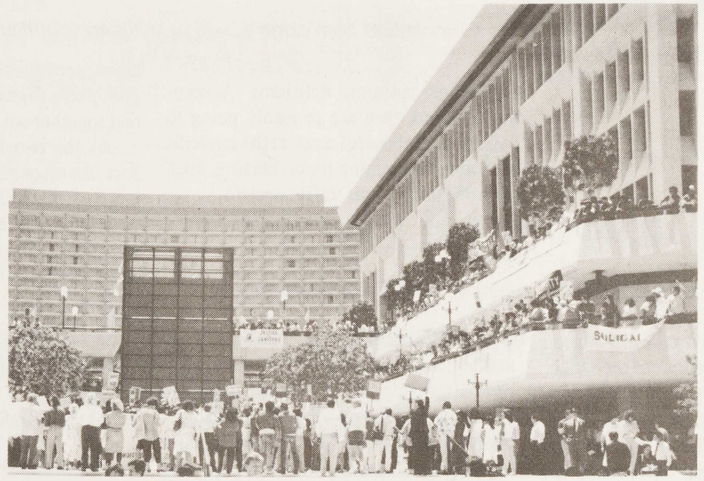
Justice for Janitors ¡Si Se Puede!

The MAAP interns' arrival at the headquarters of the "Justice for Janitors" of Local 399 of the SEIU coincided with a major victory for the union. The biggest janitorial contractor in the U.S. had just signed with the union. "¡Si se puede!," was the victory slogan; "yes we can!"

MAAP interns Ana Collado, Alex Gutierrez and Nelson Nuñez initially had the task of helping inform the workers of the meaning of their victory. It was a big disappointment to miss the strike itself, but there was still a lot to do. They observed numerous meetings, and watched Local 399's dedicated and skilled group of organizers conduct these "juntas" so as to make it clear just what having a union would mean to the average worker. Explaining a newly won contract to people that never had one before is a task that requires much stamina and patience! In a happy state of excitement and confusion during that first week, the interns also helped organize a victory march and a press conference, where Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley praised the "Justice for Janitors" campaign.

By the time the second week was underway, the three interns were busy contacting workers to turn out for a major rally. This rally celebrated the recent victories, but it also called on the troops to battle the next opponent. Janitorial contractor Bradford was the next on Local 399's list of non-union contractors. It was exciting and informative to witness the end of one campaign, and the beginning of a new one. One of the best parts of this week was making posters demanding that Bradford permit its workers to unionize, and warning them that they were the next target of "Justice for Janitors."

Week three began with a map in hand. Bill Regan, the head organizer of "Justice for Janitors," sent us out into Los Angeles to gather information that would be crucial to Local 399's upcoming campaigns. The union wanted to know, for a given building, who was the owner, who was the the cleaning company and who was the manager. This endeavor allowed the interns to see nearly all of L.A. They certainly needed those maps!



The interns also has to find out the names of the workers, so as to later do house visits and begin explaining how the union could improve their working conditions and their lives. This was done by approaching workers as they showed up at work. After explaining about the union, the interns would solicit information to later do personal visits.

For the interns, doing personal visits with the Bradford janitors was the best part of the whole MAAP experience. As one intern described it, "we visited the workers in their homes and saw their living conditions, and felt their troubles, and we were able to relate." Most of the janitors are from Central America, and the majority have been on the job for at least one and a half years. However, there is a big turnover rate in this occupation, and the conditions of employment are slave-like. So one of the roles of the organizer is to make the workers see their reality. Only this way can they organize themselves and march towards justice.

This internship demonstrated the necessity of building coalitions with other groups. Coalitions were vital to many of the rallies held over the summer, and as one intern put it, "if there is legal limit on attending events in a single summer, I'm sure we exceeded it!" The rallies attended included; a rally with Jesse Jackson, a press conference with ISS strikers and Tom Bradley, the Mandela march, a UFW rally with Cesar Chavez and Martin Sheen,a forum on the "Justice for Janitors," a UCLA Latino Conference with forty Latino students from across the country , a brunch with SEIU regional organizers, a brunch with Kim Moody from *Labor Notes*, and of course the victory party with over 500 ISS workers.

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