EDITORIAL

New Environmentalists and Old Issues

What do traditional neighborhood organizing campaigns against the Sanitation Department have to do with environmental activism?

Those campaigns to win demands as simple as regular trash pickup and a stop to dumping in poor neighborhoods by wealthier neighbors were known as quick neighborhood pride campaigns. They took on local government, and built leadership in small community organizations.

The organizers and leaders of these local fights recognized power and racism for the ways in which they contribute to the exploitation of the poor and communities of color. Those tiny sanitation campaigns — along with campaigns to save affordable housing, get a much needed health clinic open, save that last elementary school from shutting down in the neighborhood — were the precursors of current campaigns waged by communities of color around the country to resist toxic poisoning.

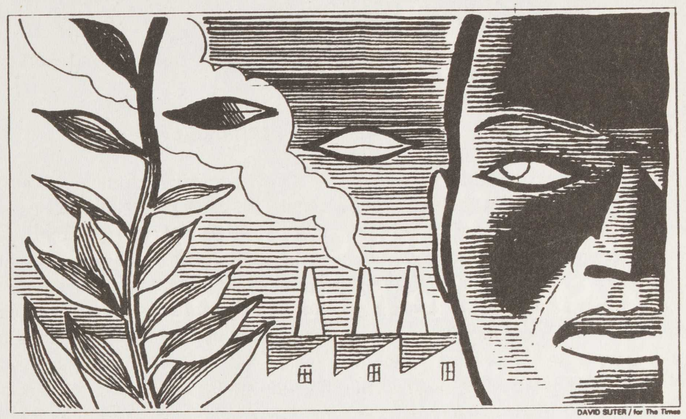
Environmental Racism

"Environmental racism" is quickly becoming the catch phrase of a new generation of activism. From the South West Organizing Project's racial challenge to the "Big Ten" national environmental organizations, to articles in the largest daily newspapers in this country, issues of racism and the environment are merging and emerging as the premier "cut" on environmental issues for the 1990s. The focus is shifting from "conservation and preservation" of the earth for the enjoyment of vacationers to direct attacks on the life-threatening consequences of corporate pollution of air, water and land.

Studies like the one conducted by the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice have revealed that toxic pollutants and their resulting illnesses are found in far greater concentration in communities of color than in white communities. The statistics from *Toxic Waste and Race* are shocking: three out of five African Americans and Latinos live near uncontrolled toxic waste sites. They are joined by approximately half of all Asian and Native Americans. Actually, these statistics were shocking only for the white environmental movement. In communities of color and corporate boardrooms alike, there has never been any secret that locating hazardous facilities in these neighborhoods is a long-standing tradition.

Toxics and Justice

This issue of the *Minority Trendsletter* highlights grassroots struggles against toxics in communities of color. As the articles make clear, the struggle to stop toxic contamination of our homes and workplaces cannot be separated from fights for decent affordable housing, or control of land in our communities, or the struggle for fair and livable employment opportunities. All of these issues are unrelentingly tied to struggles for environmental justice, insofar as the environment is defined as where we live and work. The stories in the following pages provide the content that the statistics punctuate: Native Americans defeating incinerator sitings on their reservations; African-American and Latino parents seeking to save their children from the dangers of lead poisoning in Oakland; Latino residents of Kettleman City fighting a hazardous incinerator that adds to the dangers of the dump already there.



DAVID SUTER / for The Times

Alcohol is another toxin dumped into the bodies of people of color, who often have no recourse when they try to seek help. Tied up in the increasing pollution of communities of color with disease-causing materials is a continuous decline in access to decent health care, including treatment for substance abuse. Some communities are trying acupuncture as a way of providing low-cost, effective treatment for alcohol and drug abuse, and finding it works.

These struggles, and no doubt hundreds of others like them, share several organizing lessons. First, they are taken up and led by people concurrently most affected by the problem and least powerful in the institutions that control the placement of hazardous waste and the distribution of health care. In many cases, these activists are even the least powerful in their own racial communities — Native Americans fighting their own tribal councils as well as incinerator companies show us the complexity of fighting toxics and racism in an environment where the need for economic resources overwhelms other considerations.

Secondly, these organizations simultaneously target both government and corporate power structures: Kettleman City's opposition to their own county government and its collusion with Chemical Waste Management serves as one model. Finally, these campaigns come out of organizations that do not find their beginnings or ends as traditional environmental organizations: People United for a Better Oakland ran a city-wide campaign to stop the measles epidemic from claiming more children in Oakland for more than a year before its membership decided to take on the problem of lead poisoning.

These organizations and their stories show us again and again the commonalities between our communities, our struggles and our strategies. They suggest, though they still do not manifest, the strength we could find in building multiracial organizations and coalitions.

Are these organizations, then, the new environmentalists? To the extent that environment is defined as land, air, water plus education, housing, health care, employment and civil rights, they certainly are. Whether or not the "Big Ten" or the nations's largest daily newspapers continue to find these struggles worthy of attention, these organizations comprise the frontline of the movements for social and economic justice in this decade. Like the age-old neighborhood trash collection campaigns, these community organizations and leaders will show us where power resides for profit, and the tools with which we must resist and and build a society based on justice.

— Rinku Sen

Cover Photo: Paula Williamson, Impact visuals

THE MINORITY TRENDSLETTER

The Minority Trendsletter is a quarterly publication of the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). CTWO is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization working with activists and community organizations to promote the interests of Asian, African-American, Latin, and Native American peoples.

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Subscription rates: yearly individual subscription $20; libraries and institutions $50. Sample copies available for $2.00 postage included. Discounts for bulk orders available on request.

Mail subscription orders to: Center for Third World Organizing, 3861 Martin Luther King, Jr. Way, Oakland, CA 94609, or call (415) 654-9601.

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