

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#96 - Strategy Meeting For Activists Planned In Pittsburgh October 1; Wave Of Actions Being Considered September 25, 1988

A strategy meeting for grass roots toxics activists has been called on very short notice: it will take place at the Hilton Airport Inn in Pittsburgh this Saturday, October 1, from 9 to 5. Everyone is welcome. Here's the background:

Since earth day in 1970, we have organized marches and cause days, sit-ins and occupations. We've passed laws and published tomes, and stimulated the spending of billions of dollars 'to protect' the environment. Yet our nation is producing more poisons than ever before, and we still have epidemics of occupationally-caused diseases, wasted communities, wasted lands and waters. At the same time, the political and economic power of the poisoners keeps increasing.

Polls constantly show the American people favor healthy communities, wise use of resources and clean environments. But too many people obviously do not believe they have the power to oppose the destruction that continues in our midst.

The meeting Oct. 1 is to discuss strategies for ACTIONS to show people that the power of the polluters can be curbed. The meeting is being held now to discuss a wave of actions that could start right after the elections.

Grass roots activists know that the elections will not make a major difference in our fights. The faces of our adversaries may change but the issues of toxics and resource destruction will not be handled very differently under a new administration than under the old. This is not to say the candidates are equal; they are not, and anyone who has been paying attention during the past eight years will know which way to vote and will know that it is essential to vote. But the point is, even if the better candidate is elected, the tasks before us will not change much. **NEVERTHELESS, A CHANGE IN ADMINISTRATION MAY CREATE THE IDEAL TIME TO PUT OUR MESSAGE OUT IN DRAMATIC AND CONCRETE TERMS, TO CAST THE FRAMEWORK WITHIN WHICH ALL NEW AGENDAS WILL BE CARRIED OUT.**

Some grass roots activists are convinced that the period between the elections and the start of the new administration is the best time to stage some coordinated actions against carefully selected targets who represent the worst health threats to humans and to the environment. The actions would be designed to focus attention, prick the conscience of the nation, energize toxics fighters and community activists, attract new supporters, and send a potent message to those newly elected.

Among the goals might be:

** to legitimize toxics and community protests; ** to encourage stepped-up organizing and action; ** to move toward racial unity and geographic solidarity; ** to help guardians of the status quo to overreact and err; ** to stop some poisoning and save some lives; ** to set the stage for more comprehensive achievements.

The movement for environmental justice is capable now of initiating a series of coordinated actions aimed at galvanizing public support for an entirely new agenda for dealing with toxics. The old ways have clearly not worked.

The original call for this meeting appeared in a little paper published at irregular intervals, called the **WRENCHING DEBATE GAZETTE**. Issues No. 4 and 5 focused on reasons why we need this meeting. The **GAZETTE** is free from publisher Richard Grossman, at 1801 Connecticut Ave., NW, 2nd floor, Washington, DC 20009; phone (202) 387-1000. Our 2nd and 3rd paragraphs (above) are taken almost verbatim from **GAZETTE** No. 4.

Driving in? The Hilton Airport Inn can be reached via Route 60; get off at the Cliff Mine Road exit. The hotel's phone is (412) 262-3800; a single room is \$50 for the night--some discount off this price will be arranged. Lunch will not be served, so you're on your

own at mealtime.

--Peter Montague

=====

WHAT WE MUST DO--PART 6 IN INDUSTRY, WHO KNEW WHAT WHEN?

Facing lawsuits today, facing victims harmed by industrial pollution, the captains of industry plead ignorance as a defense. They say, "We didn't know. Twenty years ago, we didn't know these chemicals were toxic. We didn't know that putting them into the ground would contaminate the soil or the groundwater. We were ignorant. We're sorry, but it's isn't our fault. No one knew."

As we continue our series, "What we must do," we will now examine the truth behind such claims. After all, if destruction of the earth's resources by chemical dumping has happened because of ignorance, then one set of remedies will seem appropriate. If, on the other hand, destruction of the earth and the poisoning of people has been deliberate, then the remedies we seek must be quite different.

We have spent this past summer looking carefully at the history of American industry and its effects on the earth and on people. In the next few weeks, we will present evidence that 30 years ago--in the 1950s (and in many cases long before)--the full consequences of environmental pollution were recognized. The geographic extent of the problem was not known, but individual polluters had in hand all the key pieces of information that they needed and that they have today. Specifically, they knew about the hazards of the chemicals being handled, the consequences of air pollution, the whys and wherefors of water pollution, including both surface and groundwater pollution. The problems associated with landfilling were recognized. The creation of what we call Superfund sites was understood as it was happening. The present situation did not come about by accident or by inadvertence. It came about because of deliberate decisions.

Furthermore, government agencies had available to them the same information that industry had. In many cases, governments had better information because they could see the big picture as the information flowed in. Government agencies chose to interpret their situation to conclude that they did not have legal power to curb the pollution, but they clearly had plenty of power to study the problems, publicize the problems and generate public support for curbing the flagrant destruction of people and the earth. The failure of governments adds up to a story of timid collusion.

Industry and government knew in the 1950s that all landfills and lagoons leak. No one even argued otherwise. So far as we can determine, the first people who started saying that "secure landfills" could be built were officials inside the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1970s. We can find no peer-reviewed scientific or engineering literature in which authors say they believe a leakproof landfill can be built; these ideas seem to have been born only in reports created by consulting firms and by government officials, reports not subject to scientific peer review. Industrialists and government specialists knew that chemicals dumped in the ground would contaminate soil and water. They knew that poisoned air would make some people sick and that others would be killed. This knowledge evidently made no difference to the people in power. It is not a pretty picture.

In coming weeks, we will present evidence to support these conclusions.

--Peter Montague

=====

Descriptor terms: environmentalists; strategies; agendas; citizen activism; environmental justice; wrenching debate gazette; pa; pittsburgh, pa; landfilling; water pollution; liability; epa; chemical industry;