

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#742 - What's Important?

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As we review the events of 2001 from the perspective of environmental and human health, we have to ask, "What's important?" These trends seem important: growing inequality, the corporate drive for global control, the accelerating pace of innovation, and missed opportunities for building real political power by linking workers and environmentalists.

Probably the largest single cause of ill health throughout the industrialized world is economic inequality, which has been growing steadily since 1973. Economic inequality is already worse in the U.S. than in any other industrialized country, and is steadily growing.[1]

How does inequality cause poor health? Low income forms part of the picture, but equally important are social exclusion, feelings of powerlessness, chronic anxiety, insecurity, low self esteem, social isolation (racism, for example), and the sense that life is out of control, which contribute significantly to heart disease, depression and other debilitating and deadly ailments. Thus fairness and justice are basic -- and eroding -- requirements of public health.[2]

The corporate globalization project, which is aiming to relax controls on corporations worldwide (under the liturgy of "free trade"), is contributing to inequality by reducing the capacity of governments to maintain labor standards and environmental standards or to provide safety nets for citizens who are down on their luck. As governments are systematically weakened, the decisions of unelected corporations replace those of elected governments, thus eroding democracy.

In addition to eroding democracy, the corporate globalization project has two other effects: increasing inequality within and between nations,[3] and increasing insecurity among working people, who can no longer be sure that they or their children will find decent work paying a living wage with benefits, or that anyone will help them out if they lose their jobs, get sick, or grow old. As we saw above, a large and growing body of literature reveals that these twin effects -- inequality and insecurity -- are among the leading causes of disease, disability and death.[2]

The accelerating pace of innovation is introducing more powerful technologies more quickly, with less time for thought beforehand. The main goal is greater corporate control.

Today the most rapid innovation is occurring in genetic engineering.[4] The future of genetic engineering of food crops leads down two paths: warfare using bioengineered crop pathogens to devastate an enemy's crops, and "terminator gene technology." The U.S. has developed, and has proposed for use, a bioengineered pathogen to kill coca plants in Colombia in South America.[4] That plan has been shelved for now, but the genetic engineering of pathogens to disrupt an enemy's crops is widely studied.[5]

The "terminator gene" prevents a crop from reproducing itself unless the gene is unlocked by the application of certain "protector" chemicals or antibiotics. Thus a farmer raising crops from terminator seeds becomes reliant upon the supplier of the protector chemicals that prevent reproductive suicide. Farmers -- or countries -- that fall out of favor can be denied the chemicals necessary for next year's crop. In sum, terminator technology provides total control over any farmer who adopts it. Pressure to adopt terminator technology could be applied in many forms, especially by transnational corporations backed by the power of the U.S. Treasury, the World Trade Organization, and the Pentagon.[4,pg.40]

Furthermore, farmers may adopt terminator technology without even realizing it. Scientists at Purdue University have patented a terminator gene that works normally for several crop generations, but eventually prevents reproduction unless treated with protector chemicals. Farmers adopting such crops could be controlled thereafter. Government (or corporations) could simply disallow the export of the needed chemicals to nations that engaged in behavior

that the U.S. considers unacceptable. Many variations on this theme are possible, but they all lead to the same end: control.

As another means of control, water supplies are being rapidly privatized worldwide. Using rules developed by free trade regimes (chiefly NAFTA and the WTO), transnational corporations are taking advantage of growing water shortages in dozens of countries, buying up water in bulk for resale at huge profit. A byproduct of this lucrative business will be political control over any country that allows its water to be supplied from outside its borders.[6]

Rapid innovation -- aimed at control -- is also occurring in space warfare. Some corporations, of course, thrive on war but many others find their business prospects reduced by international conflict. Thus the corporate ideal would be to sell everyone arms but prevent their use. But this would require total control of the world.

The U.S. has three programs with the potential for controlling the world: genetic engineering of the global food supply with terminator genes and the privatization of water supplies (discussed above), and the militarization of space -- providing an inescapable platform for destroying the enemies of the "military-industrial complex" (President Eisenhower's phrase).

U.S. plans for the full militarization of space have generally been kept out of public view, except for the "star wars" missile defense system, initially proposed by President Reagan to protect the U.S. against Soviet missile attacks. Even though the Soviet threat has vanished, the star wars program remains alive. During 2001, the NEW YORK TIMES explained why: the star wars program is a "Trojan horse" with a "larger purpose" the full-scale militarization of space.[7]

Space warfare is already a huge, secret industry based on exotic technologies, but the goals are quite traditional: control.

The Pentagon has its hopes set on a space-based laser, "the Buck Rogers kind of thing," says Colonel Doug Beason at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque. He hopes to be testing a laser weapon in space by 2008 -- 6 years from now.

Other exotic weapons are even further along. "I'm particularly excited about high-power microwaves," says Colonel Beason. A ground-based microwave weapon already exists. "We're testing it on humans now," Colonel Beason told the NEW YORK TIMES in August.

The U.S. intends to be first to militarize space. "Space is our next manifest destiny," says Senator Bob Smith, Republican of New Hampshire. And so President Bush in 2001 reneged on the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a necessary step in U.S. plans to turn the starry firmament into an inescapable platform for raining destruction down upon anyone who imperils our manifest destiny of global corporate control.

Militarizing space will start a new arms race, which will divert hundreds of billions of tax dollars into the bank accounts of corporate elites. Thus even if no Buck Rogers weapons are ever fired, merely building them will increase inequality and degrade public health.

We environmentalists are failing to recognize and support the major force that has held inequality in check for the past 150 years, namely labor unions. Even today when the union movement is relatively weak, unionized workers earn 21% more per hour than non-union workers. But more than that, it was organized working people who compelled employers to abide by the standards that we now take for granted in all civilized societies: a 40-hour work week; weekends off; paid vacations; sick leave; family leave; retirement (private pensions and social security); health insurance; limits on child labor; workplace safety and health standards; legal protections against discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual

preference, or physical disability; protection against sexual harassment, arbitrary firing; and so on. These standards and norms are not perfect, and too often they are not effectively enforced, but they are fundamental and essential to civilized life, and we would not have them without unions.

Since 1980 the U.S. has been openly hostile to working people and unions. The situation has grown so bad that Human Rights Watch published a report in summer, 2000, documenting how the U.S. routinely violates the three universally-recognized human rights of workers: the right to join a union, the right to bargain collectively, and the right, if all else fails, to strike.[8]

Unions are not perfect. In the past many have been racist, sexist, jingoist, and, some of them, corrupt. Many have been undemocratic, top-down organizations (mimicking corporations). Still, in our reading of American history, the one group that has had the greatest and most lasting success in curbing the power of the corporate elite is organized working people. In fact, no other group even comes close. Furthermore, the new union movement is now reaching out to everyone (including environmentalists, who have, so far, largely turned a deaf ear).

As counter-intuitive as it may seem at first, probably the single most important thing that environmentalists could do to protect the environment would be a multi-year campaign to change U.S. labor law, to allow workers to form and join unions, in accord with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Why shouldn't it be as easy to form a union as it is to form a corporation? Declare your intention, pay your \$50 fee, end of story.[9] If labor law reform became a top priority of environmentalists, in a decade or perhaps less, this one legislative change could move environmental concerns from the political fringe into the mainstream with powerful new allies: the 34 million U.S. working people now denied union membership, who are bearing the brunt of widening inequalities (worldwide) caused by growing corporate control.

The environmental movement's failure to appreciate and support the needs of working people is merely a symptom of an even larger problem: Because we have all pursued single-issue politics for three decades, natural allies are failing to learn about each other's struggles, much less work together.

The base of citizen activism at the local level in the U.S. is astonishingly large and vibrant. Social movements abound: the environmental justice movement, the toxics movement, the movements for clean production and zero waste, the movement to protect and empower people with disabilities and chemical sensitivities, the community (neighborhood) development movement, the anti-globalization movement, the democratic labor movement, the civil rights movement, the faith-based movement for justice, the sustainable agriculture movement, the animal rights movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement -- together they could create a massive counterforce that could take us off the earth-destroying path that our unelected leaders have chosen.

Traditionally, political parties have provided the big tents to hold people with similar beliefs. Now, however, the Democrats and Republicans have both embraced the corporate agenda, leaving the vast majority of people unrepresented. What an opportunity!

Our failure to seek -- much less achieve -- political unity remains our most pressing problem. We are divided, and so long as we remain that way, we will be conquered.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] Alexander Stille, "Grounded by an Income Gap," NEW YORK TIMES Dec. 15, 2001, pgs. A15, A17.

[2] See REHN #497, #584 AND #654. And see the bibliography in D. Raphael, INEQUALITY IS BAD FOR OUR HEARTS: WHY LOW INCOME AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION ARE MAJOR CAUSES OF HEART DISEASE IN CANADA (Toronto: North York Heart Health Network, 2001). And see, for example: Ana V. Diez Roux and others, "Neighborhood of Residence and Incidence of Coronary Heart Disease," NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE Vol. 345, No. 2 (July 12, 2001), pgs. 99-106. And: Michael Marmot, "Inequalities in Health," NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE Vol. 345, No. 2 (July 12, 2001), pgs. 134-136. And see the extensive bibliographies in the following: M. G. Marmot and Richard G. Wilkinson, editors, SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; ISBN 0192630695); David A. Leon, editor and others, POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND HEALTH: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; ISBN 0192631969); Richard Wilkinson, UNHEALTHY SOCIETIES: THE AFFLICTIONS OF INEQUALITY (New York: Routledge, 1997; ISBN: 0415092353); Norman Daniels and others, IS INEQUALITY BAD FOR OUR HEALTH? (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000; ISBN: 0807004472); Ichiro Kawachi, and others, THE SOCIETY AND POPULATION HEALTH READER: INCOME INEQUALITY AND HEALTH (New York: New Press, 1999; ISBN: 1565845714); Alvin R. Tarlov, editor, THE SOCIETY AND POPULATION HEALTH READER, VOLUME 2: A STATE PERSPECTIVE (New York: New Press, 2000; ISBN 1565845579).

[3] Bruce R. Scott, "The Great Divide in the Global Village," FOREIGN AFFAIRS (Feb. 12, 2001), pages unknown; available at <http://63.236.1.211/articles/scott0102.html>.

[4] Pat Roy Mooney, THE ETC CENTURY; EROSION, TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION, AND CORPORATE CONCENTRATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY (Winnipeg, Canada: The ETC Group, 2001); available in PDF: http://www.rafi.org/documents/other_etccentury.pdf. The ETC Group (formerly RAFI, the Rural Advancement Foundation International) can be reached at 478 River Avenue, Suite 200, Winnipeg, MB R3L 0C8 Canada; Tel: (204) 453-5259, Fax: (204) 284-7871. This report is "MUST READ" for all activists.

[5] Paul Rogers and others, "Biological Warfare Against Crops," SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN (June 1999), pgs. 70-75.

[6] Maude Barlow, BLUE GOLD:THE GLOBAL WATER CRISIS AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE WORLD'S WATER SUPPLY, Revised edition. (San Francisco: International Forum on Globalization, Spring 2001). See http://www.canadians.org/blueplanet/publications/eng_bluegold-intro.html

[7] Jack Hitt, "Battlefield: Space," NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE August 5, 2001, pgs. 30-36, 55-56, 62-63.

[8] Lance Compa, UNFAIR ADVANTAGE: WORKERS' FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN THE UNITED STATES UNDER INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 2000). ISBN 1-56432-251-3.

[9] Peter Kellman, BUILDING UNIONS (Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Apex Press, 2001). ISBN 1-891843-09-5. Apex Press, P.O. Box 377, Croton-On-Hudson, NY 10520; or phone POCLAD at 518-398-1145, or E-mail people@poclad.org. See also REHN #697, #698, #699, #700, #701.