

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#744 - The Environmental Movement -- Part 4: Rebuilding The Movement To Win

February 13, 2002

The environmental movement is a huge, powerful political force that would appear to be unstoppable. In 30 short years it has (1) passed a dozen pieces of national legislation, creating a government regulatory system that its adversaries dubbed "command and control;" (2) forced corporations to reveal each year that they routinely dump millions of tons of cancer-causing chemicals into our common property (our air and water); (3) launched a very fundamental critique of the entire industrial enterprise, that it is not "sustainable;" and even (4) challenged the bedrock idea that all human activities add up to "progress."

Furthermore, by publicizing evidence of environmental damage, the environmental movement has gained the support of most of the public. Large majorities of the public -- at least two thirds --when asked, say they want the environment protected, even at considerable expense.[1]

Yet despite these phenomenal successes and the political power of these issues, in recent years anti-environment forces have gained the upper hand. Progress toward environmental protection has stalled and in some instances slid backward. In Washington, the environmental movement has been on the defensive, really, since Ronald Reagan took office in 1980. Things improved only marginally during the Clinton/Gore years.

How did anti-environmental forces become so powerful? During 30 years of hard work, self-styled "conservatives" have mobilized a huge constituency that accepts a corporate-driven anti-environment agenda. Most such "conservatives" tend to hold traditional European beliefs: that nature was created, in a primitive and unfinished state, by a Christian God who also put humans on Earth, separate from nature and superior to it, with a sacred duty to improve the environment by dominating and controlling it. In this view, humans are entitled -- even obliged -- to exploit nature because God put them on Earth for that purpose. (The alternate view, that humans are the appointed stewards of God's creation, is a distinctly minor strain in Christian and secular European thinking.)[2]

This "conservative" constituency includes various groups that share one or more of the following goals:

(a) to reduce taxes to make government smaller (and as a consequence, intended or not, to reduce the number of government jobs, which tend to be union jobs and which tend to be available to non-white people);

(b) to increase U.S. military power, and to avoid entangling alliances (such as the U.N.) so that the U.S. can remain free to pressure any country, as needed, to protect access to foreign supplies of cheap labor and raw materials;

(c) through "free trade" agreements, to give U.S. corporations freedom and power to maneuver abroad, to evade taxes, to bribe public officials, to support private armies, to exploit indigenous labor, to extract natural resources and to dump toxicants, as needed to improve profitability;

(d) to stamp out abortion and homosexuality, to return women to their early 20th-century roles, and to enforce overt allegiance to selected Christian slogans in our public institutions;

(e) to keep the economic "playing field" tilted to the advantage of white people by denying the existence of white privilege, which gives unearned advantages to whites from birth onward (a subject to be explored in some detail in our next issue);[3]

(f) to imprison non-whites in numbers far out of proportion to their rates of involvement in various criminal behaviors, applying a different standard of justice to whites:[4]

(g) to punish the poor by making their lives difficult;

(h) to routinely violate international human rights agreements and standards by making it difficult or impossible for U.S. workers to form unions, bargain collectively and, if all else fails, to strike;

(i) to create and sustain an enormous industry devoted to distorting, ignoring and, in some cases, fabricating scientific "facts" without any basis, as needed to retain political advantage;

(j) to retain and expand the influence of private wealth in public elections;

(k) to slowly replace popular democracy with control by corporate elites.

Naturally few or no "conservatives" hold every one of these views, and some "conservatives" find some of these ideas utterly repugnant. Still the "conservative" movement is a huge tent holding many different people, some of whom hold each of these views, and because they can work together they create a potent political force that promotes the corporate anti-environment agenda in return for support on other "conservative" agenda items.[5]

Today the traditional environmental movement is not well-positioned to prevail against these pro-corporate anti-environmental forces because the traditional environmental movement was founded on the assumption that legal and scientific expertise, and rational debate, would suffice to protect the environment. Without detracting from the very substantial legislative accomplishments of the traditional environmental movement -- achieved through years of dedication, personal sacrifice and extraordinary effort -- it nevertheless remains true that the "traditional strategies and policy solutions being employed are proving to be increasingly limited," notes Professor Daniel Faber at Northeastern University.[6] This is something of an understatement. Traditional approaches have relied on lawsuits and on lobbying, and neither tactic is presently very effective. Legislatures and the courts are dominated by "conservative" activists who see the environment as something God intended us to exploit and who tend to believe that, since the corporate agenda works for them, it's good for us all.

In sum, to build on the successes of the traditional environmental movement and overcome the anti-environment forces now arrayed in Washington and in statehouses across the country, some new approaches will be needed.

Since 1980, an alternative to the traditional environmental movement has been slowly forming in the U.S., though so far it has gained little national visibility. It is called the "environmental justice" movement, and though it has some problems of its own, it represents a different approach to environmental protection, one that speaks to people about protecting the places where they live, work, and play.

As Daniel Faber has documented[6], the fabric of the environmental justice movement is woven from six strands:

(1) The civil rights movement. Apartheid officially ended in the U.S. in 1964, but environmental racism is still all too common. The environmental regulatory system created during the 1970s and 1980s had the unintended effect of funneling pollutants into communities of color. Well-off white people can usually buy their way out of polluted neighborhoods, but people of color and the poor often cannot. Pollution trading schemes, being promoted by some traditional environmentalists, may be economically efficient but they tend to heap additional burdens and injustices on the poor and people of color.

(2) The occupational safety and health movement. The U.S. passed its first national job safety law in 1970, but since then enforcement has been lax or nonexistent. Furthermore, the law excludes tens of millions of workers, such as farmworkers. At least 60,000 workers die each year as a result of injuries and illnesses related to dangerous

working conditions. Another 850,000 are made sick. (See REHN #578.) At least 35 million non-union workers say they would join a union if they could, to protect themselves, but U.S. laws violate international human rights standards by making unionization an uphill battle. Added to existing unions, those 35 million would create the largest union movement the U.S. has ever known, effectively shifting the balance of power between the corporate elite and wage earners.

(3) The indigenous peoples' and native land rights movements, made up of Native Americans, Chicanos, African Americans, and other marginalized indigenous communities struggling to retain and protect their traditional lands. Partly these groups are fighting to control land resources, and partly they are trying to retain cultural lifeways that are threatened with extinction by the dominant society.

(4) The toxics movement (also known as the environmental health movement) has been fighting for the clean-up of thousands of contaminated waste sites across the country since 1978. The toxics movement has also taken the initiative in discouraging toxic technologies such as municipal garbage incinerators, pesticides, so-called "low level" radioactive waste dumps, coal-burning power plants, buried gasoline tanks, toxicants dumped by the military, and more.

(5) Solidarity movements, human rights movements, and environmental activists in the Third World are providing powerful allies and examples of extraordinary, fearless activism. In South Africa, Mexico, Burma, Indonesia, Nigeria, Central America, in the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere local groups are fighting the same fights being fought in the U.S. but with fewer resources and against greater odds -- sometimes sacrificing their lives in their persistent demand for environmental protection, sustainability, self-determination, and justice.

(6) Community-based activists working for social and economic justice have traditionally focused on issues of housing, public transportation, crime and police conduct, access to jobs, a living wage, redlining and lender practices, affordable daycare, deteriorating schools, and dozens of other neighborhood issues. They have not traditionally viewed their work as "environmental" but now when they work on lead poisoning, cleaning up abandoned toxic sites ("brownfields"), poor air quality, childhood asthma, and other issues with an environmental component, they are indisputably a part of the "environmental justice" movement.

In addition to these six strands, we see a powerful, burgeoning seventh -- people whose health has been affected by multiple chemical sensitivities, birth defects, breast cancer, endometriosis, lymphoma, diabetes, chronic fatigue, veterans affected by Agent Orange and Gulf War Syndrome, and many others.

An eighth strand includes the international "zero waste" and "clean production" movements, which are quietly revolutionizing the material basis of the industrial enterprise.

This powerful environmental justice movement -- which clearly has the potential to become a new political mass movement -- is still in its infancy. To grow to its potential it will need to be fed, nurtured, cared for. It will need resources. In their report, GREEN OF ANOTHER COLOR, Daniel Faber and Deborah McCarthy show that, of all funds available for environmental work during the period 1996 to 1999, some 96% went to the lawyers and scientists of the traditional environmental movement, and only 4% went to all the thousands of groups working to build the "environmental justice" movement.[6] To really protect the environment (and overcome the political power of the anti-environment "conservatives"), these funding priorities would have to change substantially.

--Peter Montague

=====

[1] U.S. attitudes toward many environment-related questions can be found at http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/major_proposals_detail.cfm?issue_type=environment&list=8

[2] Clive Ponting, *A GREEN HISTORY OF THE WORLD* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993; ISBN 140176608). See Chapter 8.

[3] See, for example, Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1990). Available on the web at <http://www.uwm.edu/~gjay/Whiteness/mcintosh.htm>

The same essay has appeared under different titles in a number of places, among them *RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER: AN ANTHOLOGY*, edited by Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), pgs. 70-81.

See also: Rinku Sen and others, *THE PERSISTENCE OF WHITE PRIVILEGE AND INSTITUTIONAL RACISM IN US POLICY* (Oakland, Calif.: Applied Research Center [3781 Broadway, Oakland, CA 94611; Tel. (510) 653-3415], 2001). Available at: <http://www.arc.org/downloads/trji010417.pdf>

[4] See <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/justiceforsome/jfs.pdf>

[5] See Jean Hardisty, *MOBILIZING RESENTMENT* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000; ISBN 0807043176) and Godfrey Hodgson, *THE WORLD TURNED RIGHT SIDE UP* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997; ISBN 0395822939).

[6] Daniel R. Faber and Deborah McCarthy, *GREEN OF ANOTHER COLOR* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University, 2001), pg. 2. Available at: <http://www.casdn.neu.edu/~socant/Another%20Color%20Final%20Report.pdf>