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From: Rachel's News #845, Mar. 9, 2006

**THE MODERN APPROACH
TO PROBLEMS: PREVENTION**

[Rachel's introduction: For 200 years, industry has relied on "trial and error." Try something new, make a mess, find the money to clean it up. But now the world has changed -- there is no longer enough money to fix all the problems like cancer and diabetes, toxic waste, and leaking landfills, rusty bridges, and outmoded wastewater treatment plants. This new world requires us to **prevent** problems, not merely **manage** them.]

By Peter Montague

For the last two hundred years -- the age of machines -- humans have muddled along creating new problems, then devising remedies. The basic approach to progress has been trial and error -- try something new, wait for trouble to occur, then find the money to fix the problems. For a long time this seemed to work; more often than not, the goods seemed to outweigh the bads (at least from the viewpoint of those who created the original problem).

Now this basic trial-and-error approach to the world no longer seems to work, mainly because we can no longer afford it. We just don't have the money to create new problems and then pay for remedies. We need to prevent problems because that's all we can afford to do. It's a new world, and we're all learning how to adjust.

HEALTH CARE

Take health care. We are now spending 16% of all our money on health care. The total annual money-flow within the U.S. (measured as GDP{1}) is about \$12 trillion -- and health care is eating up at least \$1.9 trillion of that. By the year

2015 (10 years from now), we'll be spending 20% of all our money on health care{2}. Only one percent of this money is spent on prevention{3} -- 99% is spent on treating disease after it occurs.

Despite these enormous expenditures, the system is said to be failing. Here is how the American Public Health Association described the U.S. health care system in 2003{4}:

"National health groups today said the United States has the science and ability to address some of the top health and health system problems, but has failed to act. Excessive costs, widening disparities in health status, high prevalence of chronic disease, high numbers of uninsured and inadequate investment in the continuum of health services contribute to a poor state of national health.

"Health care costs consume more than 14.1 percent of the U.S. budget representing \$1.4 trillion and financing some of the most scientifically advanced health services in the world. Yet despite spending more money on health care than other nations, in 2000 the United States ranked 25th among all nations in life expectancy."

And the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) said in 2003, "As numerous strong reports from the Institute of Medicine over the past 4 years have repeatedly pointed out, the U.S. health system is failing in front of our eyes{5}, despite consuming a very significant and growing percentage of the gross domestic product, and representing the biggest employer in many communities."

TOXIC WASTE CLEANUP

Now consider the problem of cleaning up toxic waste sites. In 1980 Congress created the "Superfund" program to clean up chemically-contaminated land. The first step was to identify sites, then evaluate them and eventually clean them up. In some cases full cleanup has been impossible to achieve because contamination has seeped into groundwater, which often proves impossible to clean.

The "discovery" phase of Superfund continues. According to the Government Accountability Office (a federal agency), as of July, 2003, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had identified about 45,000 "potentially hazardous waste sites" in the U.S. and the agency still discovers about 500 new contaminated sites each year.[GAO-03- 850{6}, pg. 1]

However, in 2004 the head of the Superfund program, Thomas P. Dunne, estimated that perhaps as many as 355,000 contaminated sites would need to be cleaned up in the next 30 years at a cost of \$250 billion{7}. The 30-year estimate seems optimistic: the program is currently spending

about \$1.5 billion per year (or less) -- so it will take 165 years to spend \$250 billion.

Cleaning up 355,000 sites for a "mere" \$250 billion also seems dubious. Between 1980 and 1999, EPA cleaned up 595 sites, or roughly 30 sites per year, and total cost of the program, 1980-2000, was \$17.7 billion. [GAO/RCED-00-22{8}, pgs. 3,5] In round numbers, then, each site has cost \$25 to 30 million to clean up. Even if we acknowledge that these initial cleanups occurred at large sites, it seems somewhat optimistic to say that 355,000 sites can be cleaned up for a mere \$250 billion, or \$750,000 per site. Furthermore, at the rate of 30 cleanups per year, 45,000 sites would take 1500 years to complete and 355,000 sites would take nearly 12,000 years.

In addition to 45,000 toxic waste sites (or 355,000 sites, depending on who you believe), EPA has acknowledged the existence of 32,000 underground storage tanks that eventually will leak and must be evaluated and dealt with.[GAO 06-45{9}]

About 75 million Americans live within four miles of a Superfund toxic waste site, so there are solid public health reasons for wanting to speed the cleanup of toxic waste sites. [GAO-03-850{10}, pg. 1] There are also solid economic reasons to reduce pollution: A recent study pegged the cost of pollutant-related disease in U.S. children{11} at \$54.9 billion per year.

In sum, we cannot afford to clean up the toxic wastes that have been created so far -- and of course new sites are being created all the time. EPA has never developed a forward-looking program that says, "This Superfund site was created by X industry -- let's go look at all companies in X industry to see if they are producing similar problems today, and if they are, get them to stop." Substantial monies could be saved by such a forward-looking program.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE U.S. IS CRUMBLING

Consider, too, that the physical infrastructure of the U.S. is crumbling. We simply cannot afford to maintain all the roads, bridges, tunnels, and wastewater treatment plants that we have built.

Here is how the Environment News service reported the state{12} of the infrastructure one year ago:

"RESTON, Virginia, March 10, 2005 (ENS) -- America's roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, dams, rail lines, and waste treatment systems are failing to keep up with the heavy demands made of them, and will take a total investment of \$1.6 trillion dollars over five years to bring up to acceptable levels. This bleak report card on the nation's infrastructure was issued Wednesday by the people who build and repair these structures, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE).

"Once every four years, America's oldest national engineering society reports on the condition of the nation's infrastructure, and each report card has been worse than the last.

"Our infrastructure is sliding toward failure and the prospect for any real improvement is grim,' William Henry, president of the American Society of Civil Engineers declared, releasing the society's 2005 Report Card for America's Infrastructure at a news conference in Reston.

"Grades range from a high of C+ for solid waste to a low of D-for drinking water, navigable waterways and wastewater."

Again, there's simply no money to make all the needed repairs in the nation's infrastructure. It seems apparent that we will need to simplify the nation's infrastructure if its maintenance costs are to become affordable.

TAX CHEATS ARE BEING ENCOURAGED AND ARE INCREASING

Last month the Commerce Department released two studies showing that by 2003 tax cheating had increased 37%{13} since George W. Bush took office in 2000.

The study showed that, in 2001, Americans cheated the government out of \$345 billion in taxes owed, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) said that estimate was probably low because the study only looked at individuals and small unincorporated businesses -- in other words, tax cheating by corporations was not even studied.

Tax cheating is not likely to diminish because both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have voted to cut the Internal Revenue Service's enforcement staff by 30% over the past 17 years, at a time when the tax code has become more complicated and laws have been passed increasing the ability of taxpayers to avoid audits. In his 2007 budget, President Bush laid out a five-point plan that, if entirely successful, could reduce tax cheating by one-tenth of one percent.

HEALTH-CARE FOR RETIRING BABY BOOMERS WILL DRAIN THE SYSTEM

As Thomas Friedman wrote Jan. 4, 2006{14} in the New York Times, "USA Today recently quoted David Walker, the U.S. comptroller general, as saying we are about to be hit by 'a demographic tsunami' that will 'never recede.'" The baby boomers total 77 million, and their first wave turns 60 this year. Unless we trim the Medicare and Social Security benefits promised to these boomers, the paper noted, America's 'national debt will grow more than \$3 trillion through 2010, to \$11.2 trillion. The interest alone would cost \$561 billion in 2010, the same as the Pentagon [budget].'"

Nicholas Kristoff wrote in the Times (May 1, 2005{15}), "We boomers are also preying on children in a more insidious way: We're running up their debts, both by creating

new entitlement programs and by running budget deficits today. Laurence Kotlikoff, an economist and fiscal expert who with Scott Burns wrote the excellent and scary book "The Coming Generational Storm," calls this 'fiscal child abuse.'

"The book says that the Treasury Department commissioned a study by two economists of the United States' long-term liabilities, for inclusion in the 2004 federal budget. The study found that the government faces a present value 'fiscal gap' -- the excess of expected payments over expected revenues -- of \$51 trillion. That's 11 times our official national debt and also greater than our total net worth, meaning that in some sense we're bankrupt.

"Not surprisingly, the Bush administration took a look at the study, blanched, and declined to publish it," Kristoff wrote.

SUMMARY

Purposefully, the U.S. does not have its fiscal house in order. The government is living on borrowed money -- almost 9 trillion dollars of it. This is part of a plan by so-called "conservatives" in Congress and the White House. They call their plan "starve the beast{16}" and the goal is to drive the government so far into debt that it will be permanently crippled. In the summer of 2001, as the federal budget was sliding into deficit, Mr. Bush declared that the rising deficit was "incredibly positive news" because it would "put a straight-jacket on federal spending."

What this means is, we can no longer afford to innovate using trial and error. We must now think very carefully before deploying technical innovations because if they cause trouble, we can no longer afford to clean up the mess. It's a new world of tight fiscal limits, which are likely to get tighter as time passes, and it requires us to adopt a preventive, precautionary approach.

- {1} <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GDP>
- {2} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/health_care_to_use_20pct_of_gdp060222.htm
- {3} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/curing_our_public_health_system060211.htm
- {4} http://www.apha.org/news/press/2003/leading_causes.htm
- {5} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/health_care_system_is_broken20030616.htm
- {6} <http://searching.gao.gov/query.html?col=+&qt=+GAO-03-850&charset=iso-8>
- {7} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/changes_needed_in_superfund20041205.htm
- {8} <http://searching.gao.gov/query.html?col=+&qt=+GAO%2FRCED-00-22&charset=iso-8859-1&ql=&x=13&y=9>
- {9} <http://searching.gao.gov/query.html?qt=GAO+06-45&charset=iso-8859-1&col=audprod&col=legal&amo=3&ady=10&ayr=2005&bmo=3&bdy=11&bbyr=2006>

- {10} <http://searching.gao.gov/query.html?col=+&qt=+GAO-03-850&charset=iso-8>
- {11} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/costs_of_environmental_disease_in_kids.ehp.20020701.pdf
- {12} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/us_infrastructure_is_crumbling050310.htm
- {13} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/tax_cheating_has_gone_up060215.htm
- {14} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/social_insecurity_crisis060104.htm
- {15} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/greediest_generation.050501.htm
- {16} http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/starve_the_beast.050304.htm

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URL: http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/another_world_is_possible.060130.htm

From: Mother Jones, Jan. 31, 2006

ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

[Rachel's introduction: "There are reasons to believe we are entering what can only be called a systemic crisis. And the emerging possibilities are not easily described by the conventional wisdom of either left or right. The institutional power arrangements that have set the terms of reference for the American political-economic system over roughly the last half century are dissolving before our eyes -- especially those that once constrained corporate economic and political power."]

Beyond the remains of yesterday's politics, the change you're looking for has already begun.

By Gar Alperovitz{1}

Where is America headed? It's not hard to find pessimists. Author and former Nixon adviser Kevin Phillips believes the nation is dominated by a new "plutocracy" in which wealth reaches "beyond its own realm" to control government at all levels. The writer Robert Kaplan predicts that our society could soon "resemble the oligarchies of ancient Athens and Sparta." Sociologist Bertram Gross has predicted a "friendly fascism." Imagine what another 9/11 would do.

It's also not hard to find optimists. Bush is in trouble, the GOP is struggling to recruit candidates in many races, and liberals are beginning to smell blood. After all, if 70,000 votes had gone the other way in Ohio -- and if voters hadn't been forced to wait in line for endless hours-we might have a Democrat in the White House right now. The Dean campaign, America Coming Together, MoveOn, Wellstone Action, and many other efforts show new energies beneath the surface. The Iraq war is becoming increasingly unpopular. The pendulum will surely swing.

My own view is that both these judgments are almost certainly wrong. Both assume that the crisis we face is a political one, pure and simple. But what if it is something different? There are reasons to believe we are entering what can only be called a systemic crisis. And the emerging possibilities are not easily described by the conventional wisdom of either left or right.

The institutional power arrangements that have set the terms of reference for the American political-economic system over roughly the last half century are dissolving before our eyes -- especially those that once constrained corporate economic and political power.

First, organized labor's capacity to check the giant corporation, both on the shop floor and in national politics, has all but disappeared as union membership has collapsed from 35 percent of the labor force in the mid-1950s to a mere 7.9 percent in the private sector today. Throughout the world, at the heart of virtually every major progressive political movement has been a powerful labor movement. Liberalism in general, and the welfare state in particular, would have been impossible without union money and organizing. The decline of labor is one of the central reasons traditional liberal strategies are in decline.

Second, globalization has further enhanced corporate power, as the threat to move jobs elsewhere erodes unions' bargaining capacity, while at the same time working to reduce taxation and regulation. (The corporate share of the federal tax burden has declined in eerie lockstep with union membership -- from 35 percent in 1945 to 10.1 percent in 2004.) This in turn has intensified the nationwide fiscal crisis, further undercutting efforts to use public resources to solve public problems ranging from poverty and hunger to energy conservation and even simple repair jobs such as fixing decaying roads, bridges, and water systems throughout the nation.

Third -- and most important -- the Republican "Southern Strategy" has now completed the transformation of a once (nominally) Democratic South that at least voted for Democratic presidents into a reactionary bastion of corporate power based on implicit racism and explicitly religious divide-and-conquer fervor. Bill Clinton's brief moment occurred just before the full consolidation of this Southern stranglehold. Very few observers have grasped the full implications of this shift: The United States is the only advanced political economy where the working class is fundamentally -- not marginally -- divided by race. It is also the only one where a massive geographic quadrant is now essentially beyond the reach of traditional progressive politics. George Bush, though extreme, is no accident; nor can the core political relationships that now define the South be easily unraveled. Hence, yes, a Democrat might be elected president one day. But no, such a shift is not going to nurture an era of renewed liberal or progressive reform. The system of power that once allowed this no longer exists. Period.

Some who have sensed the far-reaching character of these system-wide changes have despaired of any hope for the future. Perhaps the end of one set of structural relationships -- the ones we have come to take for granted in our own lifetimes -- spells the end of all potentially positive systemic possibilities.

Perhaps.

But I am a political economist and a historian, one for whom the best way to understand current events is to think of them as an ongoing movie, not a snapshot. What is interesting is not simply the current reel, but the previous one, and above all what both suggest about the next one. Even though I think times are likely to get worse before they get better, let me explain why I am a prudent optimist about the long haul -- even allowing for the profound changes taking place (and in some ways because of them).

There have been other times when change seemed impossible. During the McCarthy era of the mid-1950s, for instance, they shot anything that moved politically, especially in my (and Joseph McCarthy's) home state of Wisconsin. Fear erased any suggestion of progressive ideas, and anyone who dared to even say as much was obviously a fool. What came next, of course, were the multiple -- and totally unpredicted -- political explosions of the 1960s. Clearly, those who viewed the 1950s simply as a depressing snapshot were missing something very important.

Similarly, we tend to recall Martin Luther King Jr. and the great civil rights moment of the 1960s as if they'd arisen easily, almost naturally. We forget that for many decades prior, there was very little to suggest the possibility of momentous change. Those who thought otherwise, who did attempt to organize in the South, risked their lives. The challenge of George Bush pales in comparison with the challenge of Mississippi in the 1940s and 1950s.

The idea that environmental concern might one day become important also seemed far-fetched only a few decades ago. When I directed legislative work for Senator Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day, everyone knew environmentalism was a political non-starter until, seemingly out of nowhere, a powerful movement forced Richard Nixon to create the EPA and sign the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts.

We also tend to forget that the feminist movement produced what became the most important cultural revolution in modern history after decades of seeming quietude once the franchise was achieved in 1920.

Even more broadly: The Soviet Union collapsed, apartheid retreated abruptly, the French Revolution overthrew the monarchy, a handful of minor American colonies defeated the great British Empire -- all against huge odds, and all unexpected by the experts.

Such reminders of historical possibility do not guarantee that a future progressive revival is building up beneath today's surface calm. They simply suggest that the pessimists may -- or may not -- be right, and that those with their noses glued to the window glass of the immediate present commonly miss the changing weather patterns in the distance.

It is the nature of a systemic crisis to create pain -- from loss of jobs and lack of health care to trouble paying for college or even secure housing -- especially (as Katrina revealed) at the state and local levels. Which also means that this -- not national politics, where progressives so often feel impotent -- is the place to look for longer-term hope of change.

In almost every era of American history, the ideas, experiments, programs, and organizing that ultimately fueled major societywide reform were developed first at the state and local levels -- and they were usually developed, we might add, out of pain. Moreover, in almost every instance, ordinary people -- not saints, not national leaders -- were central to the process. Poor farmers in Mississippi slept with shotguns next to their beds during the civil rights era. Nineteenth-century women organized to demand the right to vote at a time when the mere idea seemed laughable -- and slowly, agonizingly succeeded in state after state until they built up enough momentum to enact constitutional changes. The workers and farmers who laid the groundwork for the populist and progressive eras faced organized violence, Pinkerton goons, armed troops deployed against strikers, but in the end they, too, achieved system-wide reforms. And during the hysteria of the McCarthy era, ordinary people in Wisconsin -- teachers, college students, factory workers -- quietly laid the foundation for an ultimately successful "Joe Must Go" effort. I vividly remember one of my high school English teachers stuffing pamphlets into mailboxes at night. He would have lost his job had he been discovered -- not for participating in politics, which at least in theory was his right, but for daring to defy a senator who brooked no challenge.

It is a commonplace of serious historical research worldwide that the unsung actions of people where they live and work are central to large-order change. Regulatory commissions for railroads and other industries, minimum-wage laws, food-and drug-safety laws, the estate tax, the eight-hour workday, Social Security and related forms of public insurance, child labor laws, laws to increase factory safety, workers' compensation, the preservation of national parks and other conservation measures, and many, many other national policies at the heart of modern American reality built upon precedents first developed and refined by local citizen effort.

IS THERE ANYTHING IMPORTANT and potentially system-changing going on at the grassroots today? Yes -- but you have to look beyond conventional media reporting, and even beyond the traditional New Deal and progressive policy paradigms.

One of the most important trends involves an array of new economic institutions that transform the ownership of wealth

in ways that benefit "small publics," groups of citizens whose efforts feed into the well-being of the community as a whole. Here are a few little-known facts:

** More people are now involved in some 11,500 companies wholly or substantially owned by employees than are members of unions in the private sector.

** There are more than 4,000 nonprofit community development corporations that build housing and create jobs in cities across the nation.

** Both Democratic and Republican city officials have begun to establish municipally owned public companies to make money for their communities (and often to solve environmental problems).

** Numerous quasi-public land trusts that stabilize housing prices now exist.

** Cities and states regularly invest in job-creating efforts, often using large-scale public pension assets. In Alaska, the state's Permanent Fund invests oil revenues and provides each citizen with dividends. In Alabama, the public employee retirement system finances a broad range of job-stabilizing and moneymaking industries, including many employee-owned businesses. Numerous other local and state activist efforts to shift the way wealth accumulates and moves around are under way, from "living wage" campaigns to Wal-Mart challenges and beyond.

Not surprisingly, in case after case, ordinary citizens have taken the lead in developing these new strategies, because they often represent the only way to solve real-world problems in the face of national-level failure.

Put another way: The systemic crisis is systematically driving unsolved problems to the local level -- and systematically, too, forcing the development of (and opening the way for) new approaches.

The emerging strategies point toward a quietly developing "commonwealth tier" of the economy.

At the same time, in quite another realm, there has also been what might be called a "populist vector" of change -- a push to create more economic equality, not by taxing the middle-class suburbs (as in much traditional liberal policy), but rather the top 1 to 3 percent who, amazingly, own more than half of all of America's investment capital. (The top 1 percent alone has twice the income of the bottom 100 million Americans!)

These new strategies move the political divide, putting 97 to 99 percent of the population together on the side that has much to gain from progressive politics.

In November 2004, for instance, California voters overwhelmingly approved tax increases for people making more than \$1 million, and earmarked the proceeds for mental

health programs. New Jersey has enacted legislation taxing those making more than \$500,000, and designating the money to offset property taxes that fall disproportionately on the middle class and the poor. In Connecticut, a recent poll found 77 percent of voters, including 63 percent of Republicans, in favor of a tax on those making more than \$1 million. A 2006 initiative in California would tax the top 1 percent (individuals making more than \$400,000 and couples making more than \$800,000) to pay for quality preschool for all four-year-olds. As the fiscal crisis deepens, many other states are beginning to look in this direction.

If the national policy process remains deadlocked and the pain continues to build, it is not unreasonable to predict that both the wealth-building and populist trends will accelerate - and might ultimately explode, New Deal-style, in a fireworks of national policies based on the steady accumulation of local and state experience and political networks.

What makes the wealth and tax trajectories particularly interesting is that they involve institutional change. This takes us to the deeper meaning of the systemic crisis. In fact, it is not simply that the traditional balancing forces in the corporate system have collapsed. Rather, the very nature of that system -- especially its rules for how wealth is owned and managed -- appears to be coming into focus.

The truly defining characteristic of any political-economic system centers always on the issue of property: In the feudal era, massive land ownership was central to who had power. In 19th-century capitalism, modest-size enterprise ownership (of farms as well as businesses) was central. In modern capitalism, corporate and elite ownership is key. In socialism, state ownership is the hallmark.

What is striking is that taken together, the various emerging strategies offer the possible outlines of a different answer to the central question of who should own wealth. That longer-range vision is a very decentralized, community-benefiting economic system. Variations on the Alaska and Alabama precedents (and many other state investment programs) even suggest a larger-scale federal ownership option -- and, ultimately, a populist commonwealth alternative to both socialism and capitalism. If so, the current realities we assume to be inevitable and immovable just might be neither. And, just possibly, the kind of systemic change that is common throughout world history may not have stopped dead in its tracks at the outset of the 21st century.

I am a historian, not a utopian. It is possible that things will never change, or that times will get worse. It is, of course, also obvious that the only way to find out if major change is possible is to roll up one's sleeves and get to work. (Besides, there is little to lose; good things get done no matter what.)

For skeptics in general and progressives in particular, it is useful to recall one other case study of how very large-order change (not simply electoral victory) can sometimes be achieved against huge odds: In the 1940s and 1950s,

conservative thinkers and activists were regarded as antique and ridiculous by the mainstream press, by most serious academics, and by the nation's political leadership. They were far more marginal than today's liberals; the idea that you could change the system in their direction seemed absurd. Long before Goldwater in 1964 and Reagan in 1980, however, serious conservatives got down to the work of putting together a movement that would come to dominate every major institution of national governance. For the moment, that is -- until we see the next reel of the movie.

Gar Alperovitz is a professor at the University of Maryland, and the Author of *America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy*{2}.

{1} <http://www.powells.com/biblio/1-0471667307-0>

{2} <http://www.powells.com/biblio/1-0471667307-0>

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URL: http://www.precaution.org/lib/06/organizing_against_big_oil.060301.htm

From: Socialism and Liberation, Mar. 1, 2006

ORGANIZING AGAINST OIL INDUSTRY RACISM

[Rachel's introduction: Prior to 1980, the movement to protect the natural environment was mainly concentrated in middle-class communities and focused on issues far removed from the environmental crisis in urban areas. The West County Toxics Coalition in North Richmond, California, has played a vital role in urbanizing the environmental struggle by connecting environmental violations to the inherent racism of toxic dumping in poor areas.]

Interview with environmental justice leader Henry Clark

By Keith Pavlik

For decades, the movement to protect the environment was mainly concentrated in middle-class communities and focused on issues far removed from the environmental crisis in urban areas. The West County Toxics Coalition, which operates in North Richmond, California, has played a vital role in urbanizing the environmental justice struggle. Not only has this organization exposed the crisis within urban areas, it has connected environmental violations to the inherent racism of toxic dumping in poor areas.

In January, Socialism and Liberation{1}'s Keith Pavlik interviewed Henry Clark, executive director of West County Toxics Coalition, about the situation in North Richmond and the fight for environmental justice and against racism.

How long have you been involved in the struggle for environmental justice against toxic racism?

I have been involved in the environmental justice movement for about 21 years now. In the early 1980s, I started working in North Richmond, Calif.

What is the particular situation in North Richmond with environmental racism?

We have a devastating situation there. I was born in North Richmond in 1944, and raised there adjacent to the Chevron refinery. I remember clearly the many fires and explosions at the refinery. Then and even now, they would rock our house like an earthquake. That's why I always say that we're on the frontline of the chemical assault.

We have experienced a wide variety of chemical assaults. In 1989, there was a fire and explosion at the refinery that sent black clouds of toxic smoke over our community for a whole week. We were engulfed in toxic smoke. And today there's a high rate of cancer and respiratory problems in the community, which most of us believe is associated with chemical exposure from the Chevron refinery.

What has been your experience in trying to fight this environmental injustice in Richmond, and who are the corporate players that you have been confronting?

It has been quite an uphill battle. Before the West County Toxics Coalition was formed in 1980, there was no organization that addressed the environmental injustices in our community. Yet, everyone knew about the problem, because most of us complained among ourselves about this bad situation. We wondered when the next big fire and explosion would happen and if it would wipe out everyone. But there was no organizing around the issues of environmental injustice or environmental racism, so nothing ever really changed until we began to organize in 1980.

Now there were some good reasons why nothing happened and nobody organized around these issues. It was primarily because Chevron is the largest oil refinery in the western part of the Americas. Chevron, one company alone, contributes about 25 percent or more to the city of Richmond's tax base. That translates into power down at city hall. But they don't really hire many people from North Richmond or the surrounding communities who experience the daily toxic emissions and the periodic fires and explosions. They seem to have a permanent work force of approximately 1,300 employees, and only 5 percent actually live in the city of Richmond.

Was the community successful in winning any regulatory or legal battles against Chevron, and how effective were they in changing the situation in the community?

We have won some battles over the years. In terms of the legal battles, there have been numerous lawsuits filed against Chevron by various attorneys on behalf of residents. A couple of suits have been settled, but it's usually not in the community's best interest. In other words, they don't get any large amounts of compensation. Most of the settlement

money goes to the attorneys, and the residents may get \$100 to \$300 at the most. If they have documented serious health problems, an individual may receive as much as seven or nine hundred dollars. And those are really rare cases.

One of the major victories that we have won from Chevron is the closing down of the hazardous waste incinerator at their Chevron- Ortho Chemical Company division, also located in North Richmond. This division produces pesticide products. They had a hazardous waste incinerator that had been operating since 1967 under a temporary permit.

The community was never involved in any hearings or process. We opposed the use of the incinerator located there. Most people are under a naive assumption that if the company posed a threat to public health and safety then the government would not have allowed it to operate. Such an assumption is rather naive because they don't really understand the political process. Chevron was trying to get a permanent permit to operate the hazardous waste incinerator at their Ortho facility, where the incinerator burnt up to 70,000 tons of hazardous waste annually.

In 1990, the company filed an application with California's Department of Toxic Substance Control to expand the waste burning from 70,000 tons to 120,000 tons. We opposed that expansion. We said that the company should not get a permit to expand the waste burning. The company should submit a plan to actually reduce the waste that was being burnt in the incinerator and phase out the use of the incinerator over a reasonable period of time that we would all agree upon. Those were our demands.

And so we organized in the North Richmond area, Central Richmond area, and all communities surrounding that particular incinerator. We took about 1,200 signed postcards to Berkeley, California, to the Department of California Toxic Substance Control. Community leaders handed those postcards to the department officials. About two weeks later, we received word from the Department of Toxic Substance Control that Chevron was withdrawing its application for the incinerator expansion and that in fact the incinerator was going to be closed down. In June 1991, the incinerator was closed and torn down. The incinerator has been completely dismantled.

That was our first major victory, because it eliminated the 70,000 tons of hazardous waste being spewed annually into our community. We knew that we were going to keep organizing until we won that particular battle. But it was quite amazing the way that it happened. It showed us that if we had lacked organization there, if the West County Toxics Coalition had not organized residents, the company probably would have gotten their permit and expanded the hazardous waste that they were burning.

Recently, we won another major victory through the Bay Area Air Quality Management District based here in San Francisco, which is the regulatory agency that governs air quality in the region. That particular battle was around

excesses or unnecessary firing activity at the refinery. Flares were being used that caused fire and smoke to come out of these long pipes. The flares are only supposed to be used when there's an 'emergency' when there's a breakdown in one of the processing units to prevent a fire and explosion.

But some of the companies like Chevron and some of the others flare on a routine basis indicating that they are running a shabby operation. We had been complaining for the last 20 years to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District that they should stop the company from excessive flaring. Finally, last year, the West County Toxics Coalition along with allies forced the district to adopt a flare control rule. It eliminated up to 15 tons per day of flaring activity at refineries throughout the Bay Area Air Quality Management District region.

Chevron and other companies claimed that the numbers were exaggerated. They said the 15 tons per day was really less than 5 tons per day. They argued that most of the gas that was being released was methane gas. Even by their own admission, that's a problem, because methane gas is a greenhouse gas that adds to global warming and global climate change. Methane gas has the potential to produce greenhouse effects about five times or more than carbon dioxide, which is one of the more well-known greenhouse gases. This was a double victory for us, because it not only reduced carbon dioxide, but it also reduced the large quantity of methane gas, which contributes to global climate change.

In your experience, what is the force that drives the oil companies to take measures that destroy entire communities?

The oil companies are basically concerned about profits—it's their bottom line, profits at the expense of the people. They will go to any extent to make those profits. If it means destroying the environment or poisoning lower income communities of color, they will do that. Their bottom line is making profits.

In terms of environmental racism and environmental injustice, the West County Toxics Coalition and Communities for a Better Environment completed a study in 1989 called "Richmond at Risk," which looked at the 20 largest industrial operations in the city of Richmond. The study collected data on the social and economic characteristics of the communities that surround those 20 companies. In every case, they were located in communities where 70 to 75 percent of the population was African American and 20 to 25 percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Now that's what we call environmental racism.

These companies obviously locate where people are unorganized, where there's high unemployment and they pretty much can get away with anything in their mad drive to make profit. Of course, they really don't care what color you are. For instance, some communities like Martinez, where the Shell refinery is located, are working-class white communities. They also have the daily emissions and the

periodic fires and explosions, although by and large the companies are located in and around low-income communities of color. But in the end, the only color that the corporate executives see is green.

What do you see as the solution to the destruction of the environment by the corporations and the racism that accompanies it?

The solution is for the companies to come under the control of a government that's really representative of the people. Presently, the corporations control the political process and the legislature and the lawmakers. They are all in bed together. It's like hand-in-glove. That's not going to protect communities or the environment.

Under the present system, under the capitalist system, the corporations like Chevron, Shell and Texaco control the political process. Decisions are made in their favor. I don't really see any hope for saving the environment or dramatic change under the present social order. You may win a victory here or there, but in terms of really protecting the environment or merely shifting our dependence on fossil fuel that leads us into wars in Iraq or in Afghanistan, wars for oil—that can't happen under the current social order.

Chevron or Chevron-Texaco is knee-deep in the war there in Iraq. In fact, Chevron had been processing stolen Iraqi oil, as we say, at the Richmond refinery even before the war actually started. And we know that because the Chevron officials acknowledge it. We are opposed to any Iraqi oil being processed in Richmond. Any time that we find out about ships that are bringing any stolen Iraqi oil to Richmond, we plan to protest them. We plan to intervene and stop those shipments from reaching the refinery at Richmond.

Do you see common features between the struggles against racism and for environmental justice in North Richmond with other struggles around the country?

Yes I do. First of all, the Environmental Protection Agency and other regulatory agencies that are supposed to regulate and supervise the actions of the oil companies are not protecting the environment, public health or safety. We saw the cover-up by the EPA after the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center, when dust and asbestos floated in the air and the EPA covered up all the effects it would have on public health and safety. We can see the aftereffects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita down in Louisiana and the entire Gulf Coast. Many of the refineries and chemical companies were flooded out and the chemicals, a soup of chemicals that drenched the area, are everywhere. The EPA is covering up the risk or threat from all the contamination.

The people are not being protected at all. The lives of people of color and all poor people in general are not being respected. And it's the same underlying reason: You're used for cannon fodder in the wars or exposed to risks from living

next to chemical companies or unemployed. You don't have health care.

This is all related, because you live in a country and a system that is a racist system. It started out like that from day one. It began with killing the Native Americans to occupy this land here, and slavery up until today. There's still no respect for poor people or people of color. It's not a fair and just system that we live under. This capitalist system derives profits at the expense of people.

Do you believe eliminating the drive for profit would eliminate the basis for the destruction and the injustice that takes place?

The rationale for the disrespect of people in the attempt to generate profits under the capitalist system must be compared to a socialist system, or how the people of Cuba are treated. The system is there to work for the people.

I was fortunate enough to travel to Cuba a couple of times and to see firsthand what's going on there. Despite the blockade and the U.S. government's attempt to overthrow the people's government there, the government is working for the people. The society is working for the people. Everybody's trying to improve the quality of life for everyone and use the resources to benefit everyone.

But that doesn't happen here in the United States. If you're sick, you don't have health care here, it's just too bad. You just suffer and die. That's why a lot of people wait until their illness is either terminal or close to death, because they don't want a big medical bill. Or if people are fortunate enough to have a job in a car factory, for instance, they can't even afford the cars or the products that they are producing.

These inequalities and disrespect for human life exist because the profit motive puts profits before people. Until that changes, until we have a society where people's needs are put first, then we're going to continue to have environmental racism, racism in general. Any risk that society has will be shifted to those outcasts, people of color, low-income and poor people.

We have to continue to fight the good fight until the final victory. That's how I've always approached things throughout my life. If the cause is fair and just, then no matter what the odds are, I'm going to be out fighting the good cause, on the side of the people. Otherwise I couldn't live with my own conscience. America has some good values that they give lip service to—freedom, justice, equality and all of that—but they don't live up to them. We must continue to organize here until we do change this system and make it work for the people.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. CHARLES BENBROOK ON GENETIC ENGINEERING

[Rachel's introduction: "So they have no control over where in that cell or where in that plant's genome the new genetic material gets lodged and expressed. Because they don't have control over that, they have absolutely no basis to predict how that trans-gene, the new genetic material, is going to behave in the future as that plant deals with stresses in its environment, whether it's drought, too much water, pest pressures, imbalances in the soil, or any other source of stress. They just don't know how it's going to behave."]

By Arty Mangan

Dr. Charles Benbrook{1} is a consultant on agricultural policy, science and regulatory issues. He was formerly an agricultural staff expert on the Council for Environmental Quality at The White House at the end of the Carter Administration, Executive Director of the Subcommittee of the House Committee on Agriculture, and Executive Director of the Board on Agriculture of the National Academy of Sciences. Dr. Benbrook was interviewed by Arty Mangan of Bioneers{2}.

Arty Mangan: Has anything changed in terms of the regulatory requirements for approval of genetically engineered (GE) crops today compared to when they were first introduced?

Charles Benbrook: In general, I think it is harder to get a new GE food approved today than it was ten years ago. But the regulatory programs in any part of the world, including Europe, certainly aren't founded in really solid, rigorous, conservative, precautionary science. There are still many leaps of faith embedded in the review and approval processes.

Arty Mangan: The biotech industry talks about the precision of genetic engineering. How precise is the technology?

Charles Benbrook: Anyone that's been involved in the discussion about genetically engineered crops has heard

proponents claim that this is the most precise technology ever developed for the transformation of crops. For the most part, this claim is made and not challenged. It is true that the molecular biologists that create a trans-gene do know precisely what that trans-gene is composed of, because they make it. They pieced it together. In the regulatory submissions, for example, there will be a diagram of the trans-gene, exactly what genetic material is in different places, how they put it together, and what the function of the different parts of the trans-gene are. So that's the front end of the process. They do have precise control over that. Whereas in conventional breeding, when a plant breeder crosses two plants, they really don't have precise control or knowledge of how those genes combine in the next generation of a plant.

So it's true that in terms of knowing exactly what gene you're trying to move into the plant, it is more precise. But it's not more precise. In fact it's fundamentally more imprecise, in that the techniques that are used to move the trans-gene into the crop are no more precise than a shotgun. They shoot into the cells thousands of particles that have the trans-gene coating and hope that one penetrates into the inside of the cell and gets picked up and stably expressed. They hope that it's only one, and that it gets expressed properly. But they have no way of knowing whether it does, and in fact they do know that it's likely that more than one of those particles actually leads to some expression, and some may lead to some partial expression.

So they have no control over where in that cell or where in that plant's genome the new genetic material gets lodged and expressed. Because they don't have control over that, they have absolutely no basis to predict how that trans-gene, the new genetic material, is going to behave in the future as that plant deals with stresses in its environment, whether it's drought, too much water, pest pressures, imbalances in the soil, or any other source of stress. They just don't know how it's going to behave. They don't know how stable that expression is going to be, or whether the third generation of the plant is going to behave just like other generations. They don't know whether the promoter gene, which has been moved into the plant to turn on the new piece of genetic material, will influence some other biosynthetic pathway that's in the plant, turning on some natural process of the plant when it shouldn't be turned on, or turning it off too soon. There are all sorts of things that they don't know.

Is this new part of the genome that the biotechnologist has moved in, exempt from the laws of evolution from then on? It's kind of ridiculous to think that it would be. But that's really what the industry and the die-hard proponents of biotechnology are asking us to believe, that somehow once they move these trans-genes in--despite the fact that they don't understand how many copies there are, they don't understand how stable they'll be, they don't understand how stresses are going to effect them--that they're not going to be influenced by the laws of evolution. It's an irresponsible leap of faith that has been underwritten by our universities, our government, by the companies and by people that know better.

This is what drives a lot of people crazy. The scope of the fraud, if you will--I know that's a harsh word--the scope of the fraud that's being sold to the American public about this technology is almost unprecedented.

The biotechnology industry says, "Well, if one of these genetically engineered plants kind of goes crazy, it's probably not going to be fit and it won't survive. It won't last in the environment. Nature will select out against it." For somebody that works for a public institution to make that point, it really borders on libelous. It's such a violation of the public trust for scientists who understand this stuff to be so divorced from fairness in talking about the technical issues to an audience of non-scientists. It's really scandalous, in my opinion.

Arty Mangan: The comparisons that the biotech industry makes to promote genetic engineering for the most part are within the context of industrial agriculture. Shouldn't the comparisons be between the potential of sustainable agriculture and genetic engineering? If they compare the promise of biotech to the worst of the industrial agricultural system--that's an easier case to make.

Charles Benbrook: I think you're right. If conventional agriculture and the problems of conventional agriculture are the benchmark against which biotechnology is judged, it will be easier to sell biotech because biotech can solve some of the problems created by conventional agriculture. But what about just avoiding the problems altogether by really simple things, like management and cultural practices? You know, you hear these people say that we've got a big problem with vitamin A. We've got to use genetic engineering to create golden rice that has elevated vitamin A content. There are millions and millions of people in the world that don't get enough vitamin A. But what about growing some squash? Growing some crops that are already high in vitamin A? What about diversifying diets a little bit?

We're worried about how we are going to feed nine billion people, ten billion people in a world that's going to continue to develop economically. If everybody just ate a little bit less meat, we'll be fine. We don't have to give up meat. If North America and Europe would eat a third less meat, and all of that farmland devoted today to growing livestock feed that's converted at about six pounds of plant biomass to one pound of animal product, if that land were redirected to rice and wheat and tomatoes and peas and nutritionally dense foods, we could eliminate world hunger.

There are so many presumptions that go unchallenged with the way these people frame the dialogue that it's no wonder the public is confused and really doesn't know what to believe. It's very difficult for the public to cut through all the conflicting messages to find what's important, but that's unfortunately the state of the debate.

What finally attracted me to work in the area of organic agriculture is that it's the only thing that's got some integrity

left. It's a viable and promising alternative. Even though probably not all farmers are going to be using fully organic systems, the more people that are farming organically, the more we're going to learn about the biology of farming, and the better conventional agriculture is going to get. I think that the success now of really good large-scale organic farmers is starting to change the practices of a lot of conventional farmers. That may be where the really big environmental consumer benefits are. If ten percent of agriculture becomes organic, that could influence sixty percent of conventional agriculture to change pretty dramatically, and that's a much bigger part of the food supply; it's a much bigger part of the land base. I think that it's important for the organic community to highlight more in these public discussions the

fact that organic farmers are pioneers in understanding the biology of farming systems, and how to grow healthy plants and healthy animals without a lot of chemicals and drugs and things that raise risks. That's important. Even though we don't have enough organic apples to feed all the kids in schools in America, it's still important that we try to expand that, because I think it'll change conventional agriculture as well.

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{1} http://www.organic-center.org/about.staff.php?action=detail&bios_id=43

{2} <http://www.bioneers.org/>

Rachel's Democracy & Health News (formerly Rachel's Environment & Health News) highlights the connections between issues that are often considered separately or not at all. The natural world is deteriorating and human health is declining because those who make the important decisions aren't the ones who bear the brunt.

Our purpose is to connect the dots between human health, the destruction of nature, the decline of community, the rise of economic insecurity and inequalities, growing stress among workers and families, and the crippling legacies of patriarchy, intolerance, and racial injustice that allow us to be divided and therefore ruled by the few. In a democracy, there are no more fundamental questions than, "Who gets to decide?" And, "How do the few control the many, and what might be done about it?"

As you come across stories that might help people connect the dots please Email them to us at dhn@rachel.org. Rachel's Democracy & Health News is published as often as necessary to provide readers with up-to-date coverage of the subject. Editors: Peter Montague - peter@rachel.org; Tim Montague - tim@rachel.org