

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#452 - The Big Problems -- Part 3: Corporate Danger

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Congress has taken hammer and tongs to the nation's health, safety and environmental laws. In committee hearings, corporate lawyers are sitting right up there beside members of Congress, dictating the changes.[1] The chairman of the House Subcommittee on Energy and Power, Dan Schaefer, a Republican from Colorado, says bluntly, "We go to industry and we ask industry, 'What is it we can do to make your job easier and to help you in this competitive world we have,' rather than writing legislation and having industry comment on what we write." There is nothing subtle going on. The "Contract With America" is a corporate Bill of Rights.

How can the majority of Americans sit by while corporate polluters openly run Congress? There are at least four reasons:

1) Most Americans feel a deep insecurity, and are focused on their own problems. Good jobs are disappearing, especially for people without college degrees (which in 1993 was 78.1% of Americans over age 25).[2] For young men without college degrees, wages have declined 20% over the past 20 years at the same time that worker productivity has increased 25%[3] and corporate profits have soared.[4] Employers simply aren't sharing the wealth as generously as they used to. The old bargain --you work hard for me and I'll help you take care of your family, including health care and pension --has been, for the most part, scrapped by the nation's employers. Now that the bipartisan wisdom of Congress has given us "free trade" (NAFTA and GATT), American capital can flow abroad with few restrictions. American workers are now in direct competition with workers in Bangladesh, Chile, and Mexico. Back home in the U.S., employers are sitting in the catbird seat, offering low-wage, part-time and temporary jobs with no benefits --and finding plenty of desperate takers.

Jobs with employer-paid pensions are pretty much a thing of the past. [5] Even the pensions that exist have been badly undercut by a series of Congressional actions during the past decade. The 41 million workers with traditional company-financed pension plans are in for a rude awakening when they try to collect in the next century because Congress has whittled away at their benefits. "The unintended consequence of all the changes, the experts contend, is a further unraveling of the safety net that American workers have long counted on for their later years," says the NEW YORK TIMES.[6] Unintended? Perhaps. Social Security and Medicare are now on the Congressional chopping block. Meanwhile, people are taking second and third jobs to make ends meet and hoping they don't get sick. In a recent poll by the NEW YORK TIMES and CNN, three quarters of working people said they believe they will face a "financial crisis" when they retire. Asked if they believe the Social Security system will have money in it for them when they retire, only 35% said "yes." [7]

Leisure time is diminishing steadily as people work harder to keep up. [8] Parents, working more and earning less, have less time to devote to their children. A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1992 found that, by 9 "measures of child well-being," conditions for 82% of the nation's children worsened during the 1980s. "These trends constitute a pattern of national child and family neglect," the Foundation said.[9]

As a result of all this, many people don't have what it takes to devote energy and time to civic issues. They have to work to pay down their credit card, and to figure out how to pay for a little more education for their children because they sense that, without it, the future for the next generation is bleak.

In sum, public and private policies, all of which originate in the board rooms of leading corporations and in the think tanks they employ to develop winning strategies, now hold a majority of the population in a cold grip of insecurity. Insecure people tend not to get involved, and certainly not to rock the boat.

2) Most people also don't know the details of what's going on because the media don't tell them. It is rare to find serious analysis

of what Congress is doing to the environment and how corporations are calling the shots. If you scour the NEW YORK TIMES, you can catch disconnected bits of what's going on, but if you only get your news from TV or a local paper, you simply won't be able to inform yourself about what's going on. Of course it is possible that this is accidental.

On the other hand, to a surprising degree the media are owned and controlled by a tiny corporate elite. The executives who make policy for most of the mass media in the U.S. would fit into a modest-sized room. Ben Bagdikian, the retired dean of the School of Journalism at University of California at Berkeley, has documented for 20 years the consolidation of media ownership and control into the hands of fewer and fewer corporations. "It is quite possible --and corporate leaders predict--that by the 1990s a half-dozen large corporations will own all the most powerful media outlets in the United States," Bagdikian said in 1990.[10] His prediction is coming true.

3) When the public encounters an "environmentalist" it is usually a quotation in a newspaper or a sound bite on TV by a representative of the Big 10 (sometimes called the Big 15). The big environmental groups are increasingly identified with the corporate elite. Executives of these environmental bureaucracies often emulate the corporate elites in dress, in office furnishings, in speech, in hierarchical style of organization, in the way they treat their employees, and in the "messages" of accommodation and appeasement that they put out. A vast majority of the public (on the order of 77%) doesn't trust ANY visible leaders (political, corporate, or civic), so to the extent that big environmental organizations are visible on the policy scene, they are not trusted.[11] And for good reason: they have shown little sympathy--or even awareness--over the last two decades for the concerns of working people, the disenfranchised, and the poor.

4) The real power of the environmental movement has --for more than a decade --been the locally-based grass-roots activists who are fighting for their children's health, their property values, and the future of their communities. A significant portion of the movement is African American, Hispanic, Native American, and also poor. Now African-Americans and Hispanics have been targeted by leaders in Congress, and by other red-necks in suits who call themselves "conservative" (a misnomer if there ever was one), as a privileged class needing their privileges revoked.

Keep in mind that the 1994 STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES shows that in 1992 those living in poverty included 24.5 million whites, or 11.6 percent of the white population; 10.6 million blacks, or 33.3 percent of the black population, and 6.7 million Hispanics, or 29.3 percent of the Hispanic population.

Keep in mind, too, that many of the poor are children. For example, half (51.4%) of the 27.3 million people receiving food stamps are children.[12] Twenty-one percent of all children in the U.S. live in families in poverty.[13]

As if poverty isn't difficult enough by itself, African-Americans and Hispanics are being targeted in numerous other ways. Bob Herbert, a columnist for the NEW YORK TIMES, summarized it recently: "Voting rights are under attack with the goal of ousting black representation from government. The always shaky edifice of affirmative action is being dismantled by folks who argue with a straight face that not only has life's playing field been leveled, but that it is now tilted in favor of blacks. Education and job training are being scuttled. Funding for summer jobs and other youth programs is being dropped. Support and funding for public school systems with large black enrollments is eroding. Plans are being drawn to deny unwed mothers and their babies even the most minimal government assistance. Food is being taken from the tables of the poor, shelter is being denied to homeless people, and efforts are under way to close the doors of hospitals that treat the

poor."[14]

Because no overarching national organization has developed to give expression to the combined vision of the grass-roots environmental movement, there has been no organized national environmental response to the Congressional offensive against people of color and the environment. The strength of the grass-roots lies in its local bases, but therein also lies its weakness because the movement remains fragmented, unable to speak with one coherent, angry voice.

Probing even more deeply into our sea of troubles, a recent letter in the NEW YORK TIMES summarized the contemporary situation: "...The core issue of our time [is]: How can you have a stable, safe society when the labor of a large and increasing segment of society is not needed? The real meaning of the 'deindustrialization' of the formerly 'industrialized' societies is that there are no more jobs for those who are not highly educated or entrepreneurial.

"Economic productivity has created a large, permanent class of those whom society cannot use and does not respect. We have marginalized those who would once have been productive factory workers and agricultural workers.

"Further economic forces are now marginalizing portions of the middle class, as corporations have discovered that they no longer need the labor of this segment of society either. The results will not be pleasant."[15]

But make no mistake. Those "economic forces" have names and faces. They have intentions. And they operate through the legal form called the corporation. They are enriching themselves, harming the health and the substance of the nation, answerable to no one.

American institutions of self-governance are premised on every member of society having a stake in the outcome. With that premise canceled out by corporate policies, how long can our institutions stand? This is a real danger.

--Peter Montague

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[1] George Miller, "Authors of the Law," NEW YORK TIMES May 24, 1995, pg. A21.

[2] STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES [CD-SA-94] (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995), Table 232.

[3] Paul Krugman, "Long-term Riches, Short-term Pain," NEW YORK TIMES September 25, 1994, pg. F9.

[4] Roger Lowenstein, "The '20% Club' No Longer Is Exclusive," WALL STREET JOURNAL May 4, 1994, pg. C1, writes: "In the first quarter, the average ROE [return on equity] of the Standard & Poor's 500 companies hit 20.12%. This... represents the highest level of corporate profitability in the postwar era, and probably since the latter stages of the Bronze Age."

[5] For example, see Fran Hawthorn, "Thought About Your Pension? You Will," NEW YORK TIMES August 27, 1994, pg. A23.

[6] David Cay Johnston, "From Washington, The Fading Pension," NEW YORK TIMES May 4, 1995, pg. D1.

[7] Louis Uchitelle, "Another Day Older and Running Out of Time," NEW YORK TIMES March 26, 1995, pgs. F1, F4.

[8] Juliet B. Schor, THE OVERWORKED AMERICAN; THE UNEXPECTED DECLINE OF LEISURE (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

[9] "Report Says Poor Children Grew Poorer in 1980s," NEW YORK TIMES March 24, 1992, pg. A22.

[10] Ben H. Bagdikian, MEDIA MONOPOLY 3rd Edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), pgs. 3-4.

[11] William Glaberson, "A Poll Finds the Public More Cynical Than Journalists About Leaders," NEW YORK TIMES May 22, 1995, pg. D7.

[12] Associated Press, "U.S. Study Shows Half of Food-Stamp Recipients Are Children," NEW YORK TIMES November 25, 1994, pg. A25.

[13] Susan Chira, "Study Confirms Worst Fears on Children," NEW YORK TIMES April 12, 1994, pgs. A1, A13.

[14] Bob Herbert, "Renewing Black America," NEW YORK TIMES July 14, 1995, pg. A25.

[15] Seth Ullman, "Let's Recognize the Alarming Disappearance of Unskilled Jobs [Letter to the Editor]," NEW YORK TIMES November 20, 1994, pg. A14.

Descriptor terms: congress; legislation; employment statistics; leisure; income statistics; children; media; jobs; civil rights; poverty;