

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#425 - Big-picture Organizing, Part 5: A 'Movement' In Disarray

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The environmental community in Washington finds itself in near-total disarray. They had put all their eggs in Bill Clinton's basket, and now most of those eggs are broken. If anyone held a lingering hope for this President, Mr. Clinton laid it to rest this week when he quietly killed the Chemical Safety and Hazard Identification Board. Congress had created the Board in the Clean Air Act of 1990 to "investigate the causes of chemical accidents, issue reports to Congress and other federal and state agencies, and propose ways to reduce the risk of injuries arising from the production and use of chemicals." At least 19 chemical accidents occur EVERY DAY in the U.S. (see REHW #408), and the Board was intended to play a role similar to the National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates airplane crashes and recommends ways to improve airline safety. Both organized labor and the environmental community wanted the Chemical Safety Board very badly. Indeed, both workers and communities NEED such a board very badly. Real people are hurt every day by chemical accidents and no agency has clear authority to investigate the causes. After an accident, industry investigates itself. At one time, Mr. Clinton evidently saw the need. He appointed 3 highly-qualified members to the Board, and they had already been confirmed by the Senate. But this week the President quietly killed the Board in an apparent attempt to appease the Chemical Manufacturers Association and the disciples of House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The President seems to believe he can out-Republican the Republicans. The good news is that no one can any longer hold on to false illusions about this President's stance on environmental justice for workers and communities.

It took the environmental community a long time to recognize the truth about this President. When Mr. Clinton entered office, he immediately started behaving just like his predecessor, George Bush (for example, see REHW #324, #326 and #345). Still, after 12 years out in the cold, when this President snapped his fingers the big environmental groups wagged their tails like lost puppies happy to find a home, any home. For example, the big enviros worked hard to give the President a victory on NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. There were 2 big centers of opposition to NAFTA --organized labor and the vast majority of local environmental activists (joined by Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Environmental Action). To help Mr. Clinton overcome the people's opposition to NAFTA, several of the big Washington enviro groups formed the Environmental Coalition for NAFTA, which included Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), National Wildlife Federation, the Audubon Society, and the World Wildlife Fund. "We [environmentalists] were one of the 2 big prongs the administration had to fight," said John Adams, leader of NRDC. "The other was labor. We broke the back of the environmental opposition to NAFTA. After we established our position, Clinton only had labor to fight. We did him a big favor." [1]

Mr. Clinton returned the favor by giving the big enviros "access." He invited them into the White House to have breakfast with Vice-President Al Gore. "I can't tell you how wonderful it is to walk down the hall in the White House or a government agency and be greeted by your first name," said Brock Evans, the Audubon Society's chief lobbyist. [2] But getting friendly with the White House staff and drinking orange juice out of silver cups never produced any tangible environmental benefits. After all, what changes can occur if everyone is committed to maintaining lock-step with whatever the President proposes? In May, 1993, in the presence of two dozen national environmental leaders, I heard John Adams of NRDC say to Carol Browner, head of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "You are our general. We are your troops. We await your orders." At that point there was already plenty of reason to be suspicious of this administration's environmental intentions; for example, in February, 1993, Ms. Browner had announced her plan to kill the Delaney clause, the only existing federal law based on the public health principle of prevention. The Delaney clause prohibits known cancer-causing chemicals from being intentionally added to processed foods. It

doesn't allow a small amount of poison or a "negligible" amount. It allows zero. Ms. Browner's idea --which she adopted directly from the food chemical industry --was to replace the Delaney Clause with a "one-in-a-million" risk assessment, which would allow "small" or "negligible" amounts of cancer-causing chemicals to be added to the American food supply. This was an idea that George Bush and Dan Quayle had been talking up, but it was Bill Clinton who actually proposed it in legislation. The Washington enviros supported the President's anti-prevention agenda because such support would continue their "access."

Currying favor with this President led the environmental community into several deep traps. For example, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) blundered into a terrible dilemma. To support President Clinton, NRDC caved in on Delaney. Instead of supporting prevention, NRDC is now pushing the "one-in-a-million" risk standard that the food chemical industry favors; NRDC is calling for elaborate "risk assessments" to be completed for every pesticide used on our food. [3] Such risk assessments are a scientific sham because the necessary data on health effects of chemicals do not exist and will never exist. Combinations of many chemicals are simply too complicated to study scientifically. Even more importantly, since the public cannot understand the technical details of risk assessment, the public is cut out of the debate as soon as risk assessment becomes the centerpiece of pesticide policy. The fight is reduced to NRDC's experts against the experts representing President Clinton and the food chemical industry. And since the long-term health consequences of exposing people to many different chemicals simultaneously can never be known, risk assessments are built upon dozens of judgments, suppositions, and guesses. What seems to be a scientific debate is actually a debate decided not by facts but by political clout. But with the public cut out of the debate, who holds the clout? NRDC? Or the President and his friends and supporters in the food chemical industry --Monsanto, Dow and the others? It is hard to imagine how NRDC's "experts" think they can win such a political struggle without popular support.

It gets worse. Now House Speaker Gingrich has seized upon the enviros' favored regulatory tool --the risk assessment --and is saying every government regulation must be accompanied by a risk assessment. Mr. Gingrich has proposed "The Risk Communication Act of 1995" which would require all government agencies to conduct a risk assessment and a cost/benefit analysis for every regulation that might affect "more than 100 people" --in other words, just about every regulation.

The procedure for risk assessment is spelled out in the proposed law. Government will be required to assemble a "peer review panel" made up of "scientific experts in the appropriate disciplines with recent professional experience with the substance for which risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis is conducted." In other words, only scientists employed by the regulated industries are likely to meet the selection criteria as peer reviewers. These "peer review panels" will analyze the government's risk assessments; if the peer review experts disagree with the government's experts, the proposed regulation will be shelved until government can convince the independent peer reviewers that the government is right, or until hell freezes over, whichever comes first. In Mr. Gingrich's hands, the enviros' favored tool, risk assessment, becomes a powerful political weapon for paralyzing, and thus further discrediting, many legitimate government programs.

This proposed law is a logical result of the big enviros' political style: caving in on basic principles such as "negligible risk" in order to be permitted to continue playing footsie with the power elite in Washington; selling out political allies like organized labor and the grass-roots environmental movement in order to enjoy eggs benedict at the White House; allowing the President and his corporate supporters to define what is politically possible; never enunciating a clear, far-reaching program that confronts the choke-hold that the corporate form has on America; avoiding all ideas for fundamental

reform that combine economic fair play with real protection of human health and the environment; in sum, never advocating a program that could catch the public imagination and spark a real revolt against the status quo.

The big enviros --and their supporters --have to recognize that the apostles of Newt Gingrich did not take power by lobbying in Washington. They took power by organizing at the grass-roots level in communities across America. They did not appeal to voters by watering down their language and selling out their principles. Of course Mr. Gingrich and his friends are lying about their intentions --they are saying they want to help the little guy when in fact most of their programs are aimed at consolidating the political and economic power of corporations and the corporate elite. But over the years most of the big environmental groups have been guilty of the very same lies.

The big environmental groups --the traditional environmental "movement" as they like to call themselves --now lack viable political ideas that can reshape and regain power by appealing to the American people. They are too timid or too indentured to speak of the nation's real problems: the raw power that the global corporations wield over our jobs, our quality of life, our mass media, our elections, our legislatures, our schools, our courts, and indeed our minds.

Because the traditional environmental movement is afraid to even WHISPER about these deep-seated sources of the nation's ills, the movement now finds itself in near-total disarray; viewed as sell-outs and detested by grass-roots activists who are fighting for their lives and their children's future in workplaces and communities across America; lacking political vision; fragmented; marginalized; dispirited; coopted; stumbling in directions that can only reinforce the status quo.

It is time to abandon all hope of saving our communities, our health, or our environment, by tweaking government regulations. It is time for big-picture organizing in the nation's best political tradition. It is time to examine in detail how corporations managed to get out-of-control in a nation founded on the principle that the people are sovereign. Out of control, serving only their own narrow interests, corporations have set the nation on an accelerating downward slide. A bold populist political program to directly confront these unpleasant realities is the only road that offers any hope.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Mark Dowie, "The Selling (out) of the Greens; Friends of Earth--or Bill?" THE NATION Vol. 258 (April 18, 1994), pgs. 514-517.

[2] Quoted in Mark Dowie, cited above.

[3] See Laurie Mott, Farrel Vance, and Jennifer Curtis, HANDLE WITH CARE: CHILDREN AND ENVIRONMENTAL CARCINOGENS (San Francisco, Ca.: Natural Resources Defense Council, 1994).

Descriptor terms: accidents; chemical safety board; bill clinton; national transportation safety board; nafta; edf; nrdc; delaney clause; john adams; pesticides; risk assessment; food safety; food chemical industry; newt gingrich; republican party; negligible risk; corporations; corporate form; populism;