

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #262 - What's Good About L.A.'s Lethal Air

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The air in Los Angeles is as bad as it gets anywhere in the U.S. For example, at the University of Southern California recently, scientists performed autopsies on 100 youths, aged 15 to 25, who had died by violence, accident, or other non-disease cause. They found an astonishing 80% had "notable lung abnormalities" and 27% had "severe lesions of the lung." Dr. Russell Sherwin, the principal investigator of the study, said the youths were "running out of lung." He commented, "The danger I'm seeing is above and beyond what we've seen with smoking or even respiratory viruses... It's much more severe, much more prevalent."

No doubt about it, bad air is killing large numbers of people in Los Angeles. For many thousands more, L.A.'s bad air means as people get older they can look forward to emphysema, chronic discomfort, chest colds and other persistent ailments, restricted movement, debilitating pain, and finally a prolonged and unpleasant death.

But L.A.'s bad air has a bright side, as well: it has provoked the formation of a far-reaching Campaign for Clean Air that seems to offer innovative ways to attack environmental destruction and injustice everywhere. It is an exciting development. People who have been asking, "How will the grass-roots environmental movement develop next?" will want to learn more about the organization behind the Campaign. It is called the Labor/Community Watchdog. Despite the name, which might seem to imply a passive role overseeing government as it fails again and again to deal with L.A.'s bad air, this Watchdog has an aggressive and expansive vision, and maybe a real bite.

The Watchdog has outlined its vision in an unusually well-written, thoughtful and attractive 80-page manifesto called L.A.'S LETHAL AIR-- NEW STRATEGIES FOR POLICY, ORGANIZING, AND ACTION. The book begins with a description of L.A.'s deadly air, moves to a discussion of who's affected most (children, pregnant women, sick people, the elderly, athletes, workers, low-income people, and people of color, in sum, a majority of L.A.'s population), identifies the main sources of the problem (carrying names like DuPont, Chevron, Unocal, and General Motors) then lays out a strategy for creating solutions. But not band-aid solutions of the kind environmental groups have tried for the past 20 years with little success. The Watchdog's strategies are rooted in the sit-down strikes of the '30s that sparked the growth of industrial unionism, the bus boycotts and direct-action campaigns of the '60s that forced passage of civil rights laws, and the United Farm Workers boycotts of Gallo, grapes and lettuce that forced passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975.

The Watchdog says, "We agree that individuals must take responsibility for making environmentally sound choices. But, for the most part, it is large corporations that manufacture the consumer products we purchase and that determine our choices through advertising, market share, pricing and other forms of power in the marketplace.

"...it is misleading for us to talk about making environmentally sound 'choices' based on our individual consumption when it is corporate America that must change its products in order for us to have any real options.

"When products are environmentally destructive we have to combine the personal choice to stop using them with the collective action of demanding they be taken off the shelf," the Watchdog says.

"If we have any hope of constructing a society that is based on industrial democracy and environmental safety, we need a strategy that targets corporate production," the Watchdog says.

Then this from Frederick Douglass: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess freedom, yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground, who want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the

awful roar of its many waters. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." [Frederick Douglass, August 4, 1857.]

"We intend to fight corporate polluters on terrain most favorable to workers and communities--not primarily in the courts, the legislatures, or the regulatory agencies, but in the workplace, the communities, the media, the marketplace, and the streets," says the Watchdog's manifesto.

And it is evident that they mean it. As you page through L.A.'S LETHAL AIR and read the captions beneath the attractive photos, you will see that the Watchdog already has built an impressive coalition of labor and community groups, has tested some of its strategies and tactics, has won some victories, and has thought hard about where to strike next. The plan is bluntly put:

"...Environmental groups don't have to show they can 'communicate' with big business by sitting on corporate boards of directors or taking grants from corporate polluters. In fact such tactics compromise their credibility and leverage.

"We welcome face-to-face negotiations with executives of polluting companies, based on concrete environmental demands. But for those conversations to generate any changes in corporate policy, we will have to: 1) organize a powerful constituency-based movement; 2) set the terms of the debate so that concepts of public health, worker and community rights, corporate responsibility, and restricted profitability create the parameters for the discussion," the Watchdog says.

L.A.'S LETHAL AIR goes on to say, "We need a model of community action that forces companies to stop producing toxins RIGHT ON THE SPOT, even if that means temporarily shutting down production."

One Watchdog goal: "To initiate a highly-visible test-case campaign to confront a major corporate polluter, and to win major changes in production technologies and processes that will, in turn, improve the health and safety of workers and communities in L.A.

"But before we initiate such a campaign we need to identify a company that (a) produces or uses a highly toxic product that is acknowledged to create a clear and present public health danger; (b) has substantial economic ties to L.A. and thus could be hurt by a boycott of its products; and (c) engages in production for which far safer and less-polluting alternatives are available--even, or especially if, transforming the production technology would involve significant corporate expense.

"It is precisely the conflict between community health and 'corporate expense' that we want to raise in the public arena," the Watchdog says.

When management caves in and commits the necessary investments to make production processes safer, "...That precedent, if we are strong enough to succeed, could begin to change market practices by other companies in the field," the Watchdog says.

"Factory and office workers, high school and college students, women, Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, white working people, farmworkers working with pesticides in the field, and the inner-city residents facing air pollution, waste incineration, and groundwater contamination must become the leaders of the new environmentalism.... Therefore the Watchdog is going into workplaces, churches and communities to develop new leaders and a new grassroots movement."

This short review can hardly do justice to the vision laid out in L.A.'S LETHAL AIR. Suffice it to say that the Watchdog's strategists are working on tough issues such as the flight of capital overseas, the dumping of toxics in the Third World, the need for

environmentally benign economic development using L.A.'s own abandoned rust-belt factories, affordable public transportation, changes in the tax structure, and international campaigns to ban particularly dangerous chemicals. These are not people who think small, yet they are rooted in local confrontation over local problems. We expect to hear much from them and about them as the decade unfolds.

Get: Eric Mann, L.A.'S LETHAL AIR--NEW STRATEGIES FOR POLICY, ORGANIZING, AND ACTION for \$15.00 (includes shipping and handling; California residents add \$1.25 tax) from: Labor/Community Strategy Center, 14540 Haynes Street, Suite 200, Van Nuys, California 91411; phone (818) 781-4800; fax: (818) 781-6200.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: air pollution; emphysema; chest colds; campaign for clean air; labor community watchdog; children; pregnant women; corporations; citizen groups; health; corporate campaigns;