

Connecting Struggles Across Issues and Borders

By Virali Gokaldas

The roots of the environmental justice movement lie in an archetypal struggle between low-income communities of color and industrial polluters—refineries, incinerators, landfills, and dirty ports, to name a few. In the last few years, leaders of this movement have worked ardently to infuse an environmental politic into racial and economic justice campaigns and to underscore local control of common resources and community-based solutions to social and ecological ills.¹

Now the fruits of this labor are becoming evident. What was seen as isolated pockets of noxious industrial impacts are now being viewed as symptoms of larger phenomena that create other social inequities. People are connecting the impacts of toxic industry to other injustices, such as forced migration and poverty jobs, and coming together to address these multiple crises.

On a hot July afternoon in Detroit last summer, over 300 movement organizers from across the United States gathered to plot a course for ecological justice as part of the U.S. Social Forum.

“We come from environmental justice communities who have been on the frontlines of the effects of polluting industries like waste incineration. But [we] also come from economic justice struggles... and immigrant [communities that] understand the connection between land and life,” said Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan, strategy initiatives director for Movement Generation based in Oakland, California.

The gathering was an important moment in cohering movements across different sectors in the United States to deal with the root causes of all struggles. Foremost on everyone’s mind was the connection between environmental health, forced migrations, and the recent Gulf Oil disaster. What do the three things have in common? The economy.

Pitching Jobs against Lives

The tradeoff facing working class communities between environmental and ecological health and sub-par jobs has become starker in this recession.

Panelist Roland Wall pointed out that he lives in

the most polluted zip code in America, but the concerns of Detroit residents have been routinely brushed aside by city and state officials because jobs are considered more important than health.

Recounting his experience in Louisiana right after Katrina, he noted that the air force base had people from Mexico, Nicaragua, and other places that were part of the guest worker program, doing cleanup without masks. “They were putting up blue tarps on roofs for Halliburton—which charged \$1800 a piece for the tarps—and being paid less than minimum wage.”

Jose Brava of the Just Transitions Alliance in San Diego pointed out that having an incinerator is not the same as having a job. “You can paint the incinerator as green as you want, but it will never be a green process.”

Environmental Devastation Forces Migration

The worsening environment in Mexico has resulted in the dislocation of vast numbers of people who are forced to take actions and jobs that are, in effect, life-threatening. Addressing the interrelationship between environmental and social justice movements, Carlos Marentes from the Border Agricultural Workers Project, said:

“When we began to organize [migrant farm workers], the farmers were our enemies. [They were] the ones exploiting us and paying us low salaries. We also saw American consumers as [our enemies] demanding cheap food... But over the years we started to learn how the agricultural system works. We learned that the farmers, the producers, the consumers, all of

Young Activists Revitalize EJ Movement

By Irene Florez & Virali Gokaldas

On an Eco-bus tour of Detroit during the 2010 U.S. Social Forum, 17-year-old Janice Nyamakye strives to capture everything with her video camera: the tour guide's comments, the city sights, as well as the 'sites'—a dirty incinerator, salt mining operations, and power plants—all located in low-income communities of color. The tour informs Nyamakye's own work in environmental remediation back home in Worcester, Massachusetts where she has been involved with Toxic Soil Busters (TSB) for the past four years.

As an organization, TSB effects improvements in the lives and environments of urban youth by employing them to first test local soil for lead levels, then remediate and redesign affected environments as needed. "We are a youth-led cooperative business," says Nyamakye proudly. "The youth do everything." As a videographer, she uses media to connect dif-

ferent EJ communities and amplify the message of youth working for environmental justice. From California to Massachusetts, groups like TSB, Grind for the Green (G4G), and Third Eye Unlimited are using new outreach methods to successfully reach a new generation of information-seeking cyberkids. And increasingly, youth interested in acting for environmental change are finding outlets through national organizations like It's Getting Hot In Here (itsgettinghotinhere.org) and SustainUs: US Youth for Sustainable Development (sustainus.org).

The Kids are in Charge

A Gallup Poll conducted this year shows



that the U.S. population's concern for the environment has hit a 20-year low. But you wouldn't know it from the level of interest and activity among youth-focused and youth-led environmental organizations around the country. According to *WireTap Magazine*, more than 600 youth-led community organizations are creating green jobs, removing toxic waste,

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us were victims of the North American commercial agricultural system."

The industrial agricultural system of production in the United States is based on the exploitation of migrant farm workers in the fields and the displacement of small producers off their land. Its purpose is to create profits and wealth that is concentrated in a few hands. Two hundred corporations control the food system of the world, of which a third are U.S. based.

"Today, eight out of 10 farm workers in the U.S. are from Mexico," Marentes pointed out. "Campesinos displaced from their communities, who are forced to cross the border, to risk their lives in order to survive."

The program director for the Gulf Coast Fellowship for Community Transformation, Colette Pichon Battle agreed that the debate about immigration is really a debate about displacement. And it is not just an issue for the global south.²

"After a painful five years people have just rebuilt and started [to] come back... now we're being displaced again," she said. "It's happening in the Gulf Coast because of oil, because of industry. It's time for us to stand up and stop what is happening."

Livelihoods vs. Environmental Disasters

The recent BP oil spill highlights how negligent business practices can cause massive shocks to people's jobs and loss of life. There has been a wetland loss the size of Rhode Island in the Gulf with wetlands being destroyed by development and fossil fuel exploration even before the BP disaster.

According to Jon Hueng, a youth organizer in the Gulf's Vietnamese community, 80 percent of the 40,000 Vietnamese Americans living in the area used to survive by fishing, which they have not been able to do since the oil spill.

"BP pays up to \$500 per month, which is not enough when you have families to feed, boat loans to repay, and housing debt," Hueng said. "There is also a serious problem of risk to mental health, including depression and suicides [among] people who can't work anymore."

Jamie Billiot, a representative of the 17,000 indigenous members of the United Houma Nation who have lived and fished in the marshes of Louisiana for many generations, said: "We are forced to work for BP and ExxonMobil. We have to force these companies to take responsibility for the damage they are doing."

There is little doubt that the many years of dredging

combating corporate pollution, and getting the message out on environmental issues affecting them.

At TSB, there is minimal adult involvement as Nyamakye and 16 other youth do everything, from fundraising and accounts management, to interviewing new recruits, to creating and launching marketing materials, to providing lead testing and remediation services.

Since 2005, TSB has cleaned 36 properties using phyto-remediation, a process whereby lead-absorbing plants are grown in contaminated soil and removed after a certain period, effectively ridding the soil of its lead. In 2006, TSB was honored for its work by the city of Worcester with the mayor declaring June 20, Toxic Soil Busters Day. TSB also weighs in on other local youth organizing efforts.

“We are part of the Save our Pools Coalition, a team of people that have come together to get Worcester neighborhood pools open,” explains Nyamakye. TSB uses Facebook, YouTube, print, and television to amplify its environmental work, educate the public on youth-related issues, encourage more youth

activism, and make tangible to them their power to improve their environment.

Social Media, Hip-Hop Help Rally Youth

Like TSB, Oakland-based G4G also uses a range of online and offline media to tap youth and adults. With a commitment to moving youth of color from the margins to the epicenter of the environmental movement in a culturally relevant way, G4G convenes hip hop and other musical events—entirely coordinated by youth staff—using Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and printed leaflets.

A typical G4G event may include an enticing line-up of local talent and known performers like Talib Kweli and Dead Prez with their socially conscious lyrics, alongside bike-powered machine displays, local food, aquaponics demonstrations, and information on environmental resources to address current challenges. “We put on events that aren’t billed as green and use hip-hop culture as a carrot to get a different segment of young people in the room,” says Zakiya Harris, founder and executive director of G4G. “Once there, we give

them a lot of other information. So if they’re not already in the youth empowerment field, our events are one way for them to engage.”

Founded in 2007, G4G follows five strategies for developing the youth workforce on its team: reconnection to the earth, eco literacy, leadership development, new media, and cultural relevancy. It is a way to ensure that the environmental justice movement includes youth of color and is rooted in inspiring solutions.

“Though communities of color may care about the environment, they are often dealing with meeting their basic needs,” points out Harris. “Pressing issues like Oscar Grant and survival issues like food accessibility take precedence over melting ice caps. But when you talk about health using innovative ways rooted in our own indigenous legacy [and] new media, young people get it.” Ozone, the outreach director for G4G, works with four other youth members handling logistics and doing research, marketing, and outreach. Their focus is to ensure that their peers attend G4G’s solar-powered youth hip-hop festival.

in the wetlands by the oil industry has made Louisiana vulnerable to hurricanes, says Battle. “These storms—Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike—that hit us all in the last five years caused so much damage because wetlands have been absolutely decimated.”

Marentes gave voice to the real challenge facing the Gulf and the movement at large when he said: “To deal with climate change, we need to deal with the system. It’s not only about imposing million dollar fines or putting CEOs in jail. We should do that, but it will not bring back the oil rig workers who died or the life that has disappeared in the Gulf because of this tragedy. We need to replace [the entire] destructive system because our lives are in danger and Mother Earth cannot take it anymore.”

A Call to Coordinated Action

Alejandro Villamar of the Mexican Network for Action against Free Trade made a strong argument for transnational solidarity in the wake of cooperative international agreements like NAFTA that have no enforceable labor or

environmental statutes. It has become quite clear that free trade agreements have caused grave deterioration of the environment, of communities, and their health all across Mexico, especially in rural and industrial areas.



Photo:

Protesters march against Arizona's SB 1070 at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan.

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"Everyone is interested in a free concert in their community," says Ozone. "And once there, they learn."

In addition to Facebook and Twitter, G4G members rely on text messaging and blogs at their own and partner websites, such as GetFresh.net, to do outreach.

In Bits and Bytes, the Movement Grows

In a world where computers are essential tools, Internet searches outnumber library visits, and cell phones are indispensable, the youth naturally are motivated not only to integrate media-making into their work but to push the media boundaries.

Ben Gilbarg is a hip hop artist who runs Third Eye Unlimited, a youth media group in New Bedford, Massachusetts that has evolved from YouTube music video production to documentary and DVD creation. Third Eye's mission is to teach young people to develop their own rhymes and tell their own stories. More recently, the organization has started focusing on the environment and environmental justice issues using hip hop.

In 2008, Third Eye earned its ecological media stripes with the hip hop hit "Green Anthem," which highlights climate change and the need for green jobs. After Van Jones showcased it at the Good Jobs are Green Jobs Conference in Washington, D.C., people all over the country started using it, according to Gilbarg.

Since then, Third Eye has created a documentary on climate change and global warming—by young people, for young people. "We hit the right frequency with young people by creating something cool and savvy, something they can feel," says Gilbarg.

The documentary has been used in assembly presentations throughout southeastern Massachusetts, with up to 1,000 kids at a time. The overwhelmingly positive feedback has prompted Third Eye to produce and distribute a video for educators that includes climate change and green economy teaching tools.

In the course of amplifying environmental concerns, organizations like Third Eye are creating friendly environments where youth have outlets to record their music, organize and per-

form at events, and carry out environmental work.

Harnessing Youth Power for EJ

From Oakland to Detroit to Worcester, youth-led organizations are empowering the environmental justice movement. These organizations are promising in their ability to motivate audiences that the environmental movement has thus far been unable to reach. By integrating youth into campaigns as producers, creators, and changemakers instead of consumers, bystanders, and audiences, they are harnessing the power of media and the ability of younger generations to adapt quickly and utilize technological advances efficiently.

Youth like Nyamakye are at the forefront of this budding movement. Her narrative about the work done by youth in cleaning up Worcester, Massachusetts provides a stark contrast to Detroit's overwhelming dirty facilities. "Youth can do anything," says Nyamakye. "As long as you're motivated, you can do anything you put your mind to." ■ —I.F. and V.G.

"My brothers and sisters in Detroit sometimes complain about the dirty jobs that were exported," said Villar. "Back home, we complain about the dirty jobs and exploitative labor practices that were brought to us! What is becoming incredibly clear is that we need international solidarity from the south to the north in direct response to this faulty model that is wreaking havoc."

The first step toward a cross-issue and cross-border approach was taken in Detroit when leaders collectively planned mobilizations against Arizona's SB 1070, actions to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and strategies to push proposals on ecological justice from last April's Climate Conference in Cochabamba, Bolivia. But they also emphasized the need to empower locals to have more control over their environmental and economic destinies. "If you give the land back to land-based people, they will fix the problems," observed Jamie Biliat, executive director of the Dulac Community Center.

Since the meeting in July, communities have been crossing borders and issue lines to stand together in soli-

arity. Folks from the Gulf Coast participated in an immigration action in Arizona to show that the struggle against big oil is the same as the struggle to allow people to move freely. With climate talks in Cancun planned for this December, various groups are committed to building a grassroots cross-issue analysis of what needs to be done to compel the U.S. government to radically change its fossil fuel-based economy and start paying its ecological debt.

"Resistance is key, but resilience is also key," says Mascarenhas-Swan. "We want to build communities that can work in cooperation with one another, restore our relationship to place, and shift out of this me-based way of living." ■

Endnotes

1. See *RP&E Journal*, Fall 2009, "Building Community Control in a Shifting Climate."
2. "Gulf activists say: Corporations must pay for environmental damage." *Workers World*, July 15, 2010.