

Roundtable C5: Local Struggles, Global Realities: Perspectives from the Environmental Justice Movement

Discussion Leaders: Angela Lomosi, International Trade Union Confederation, African Region; Miquela Craytor, Sustainable South Bronx; Kate Pfordresher, Apollo Alliance, New York City; Lisa Donner, Center for Working Families-New York; Tim Frank, Good Jobs First/Sierra Club; Sandy Pope, President, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 805, NY; Rebecca Rotzler, Green Party Deputy Mayor, New Paltz-New York; Elizabeth Yeampierre, Environmental Justice Alliance, New York City

Facilitator: K.C. Wagner, Cornell ILR

PRESENTATIONS

Elizabeth Yeampierre with the Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC) presented an overview of the alliance's history in the struggle for environmental justice in relationship to the effects environmental policies have had on low income populations and communities of color. In conjunction with achieving environmental justice two fundamental points were outlined; first that the disparate siting of environmental burdens in communities of color must be addressed and secondly, to recognize that the development of indigenous leadership is absolutely paramount in confronting the challenges at hand with any expectation of an equitable end result.

Miquela Craytor, Deputy director for the Sustainable South Bronx spoke about her organization's work in implementing sustainable development in the South Bronx. The **SSB** is currently operating a '**green-collar**' jobs training program. **The Bronx Ecological Stewardship Training Program** offers training in various environmental fields including; green roof installation, toxic waste disposal, and landscaping, engaging the participants in community renewal while attaining specialized skills to offer on the employment market. **Sustainable South Bronx** has been very active coalescing with **Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice** as well as many other community organizations, seeking the dismantling of the Sheridan Expressway which would open 28 acres of land for new development and offer greater access to the waterfront. Recognizing organized labor's potential as a considerable ally in the quest for environmental justice, the **SSB** is actively pursuing coalitions with trade unions, particularly those in the energy industry where the approach to climate change will be critical.

Kate Pfordresher of the Apollo Alliance (NYC) praised the work of New York City Mayor **Michael Bloomberg's** administration for their formation of a comprehensive long term plan to improve the city's environmental sustainability known as **NYC 2030**. The mayor's office was also commended for its effort in calculating the city's '**carbon footprint**', noting it was uncovered that **79%** of New York City's carbon was being emitted from residential and commercial buildings. Among its many activities the **Apollo Alliance** was very involved in the campaign to gain passage of **local law 86** which requires that all new building construction as of January 2007 meet 'green' building

standards and is presently focusing greatly on the questions of labor standards and job creation, as well as land usage and affordable housing.

Sandy Pope President of Local 805 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters addressed the necessity for organized labor to be more inclusively involved in the environmental justice movement, noting that in order to achieve any economic fairness in the processes of transition these new 'green-jobs' must be unionized. Proclaiming that it is unrealistic to rely on government to insure that these jobs will offer equitable compensation and security, it was proposed that these assurances can only be gained through bottom-up union organizing and community activism executed primarily at the local level. Explaining that the members represented by her union reside in areas heavily effected by present environmental degradation and confront issues of economic stagnation on a daily basis, the Teamster president called for methods of engaging each and every member at every level of organized labor in the struggle for environmental justice.

Rebecca Rotzler former Green Party Deputy Mayor of New Paltz, NY spoke in depth of her experience in the local government of New Paltz and the progressive environmental and social justice work done by the administration of former mayor **Jason West**. Among the initiatives of this **Green-Party** mayoralty were; the implementation of a methane converter for heat production at a sewage treatment plant, installation of a **rebedding system** for processing sewage sludge rather than transporting and dumping, solarizing of the city's public works building, window modernization, and the purchasing of wind power as part of a cooperative with other municipal governments in the surrounding area. Combining environmental and social justice, New Paltz adopted affordable housing legislation which provides housing for the city's workforce, volunteer fire fighters and rescue workers greatly reducing the pollution associated with travel to and from the city on a daily basis. New Paltz also sets an example for other municipalities with the enacting of sweat-shop free purchasing policies wherein all uniforms worn by the city's workforce are union made in America.

Lisa Donner co-director of the Center for Working Families (NY) described the **Center for Working Families** as a new project formed by an alliance of labor unions and community organizations working in partnership with the **Working Families Party** and several progressive think-tanks for the purposes of promoting equitable social policy. In dealing with the issues of climate change and environmental justice the Center has been focusing on questions of how class and race factor in the policies that encompass these challenges. Among the projects this young coalition is presently working on, is the promotion of green building standards for local municipalities throughout New York State with a primary concentration on both the quality and availability of these proposed green jobs.

Tim Frank, senior policy advisor on economic development and land use issues for the Sierra Club and chairman of the board of Good Jobs First addressed the relationship between environmental justice and poverty. Equating poor and low income communities with an inordinate share of pollution, the reasons for which were identified

as systemic in nature. Polluters have traditionally targeted poorer areas for dumping, relying on the fact that in all likelihood enforcement of environmental laws would be lax at best. Another historical aspect examined was the propensity to abandon contaminated properties in low income communities with no plan or intention for eventual clean-up, unlike wealthier communities where restoration of contaminated properties is given high priority. Viewing **environmental injustice** as a symptom of poverty, it was proposed that the root causes of this poverty must be confronted if we are to achieve any level of environmental justice. Public policy, promoting quality jobs along with a combination of private and public investment were offered as essential ingredients for any serious endeavor to remedy this social and environmental crisis.

Angela Lomosi of the International Trade Union Confederation (African Region), introduced an African perspective into the dialogue of environmental justice. Representing a large percentage of people living in extreme poverty, Ms. Lomosi pointed out that although Africa contributes very little to the overall sum of global carbon emissions the continent has already been adversely affected by climate change and can expect to continue to suffer greatly if the links between poverty and this environmental crisis remain unaddressed. Thinning snow tops of the Kilimanjaro Mountains, flooding in Mombassa, staggering percentages of people stricken with HIV, and the reality that most Africans do not have electricity available to them were among the facts offered illustrating the desperation of present conditions in the Global South. Concluding, if the economic and social crises are not attended to there can be little hope for the environment as well.

DISCUSSION

Much of this segment of our roundtable discussion was devoted to the importance of engaging youth in facing the challenges that lay ahead. Among other topics, the class element of environmental justice was examined with one participant noting that the present state of the American labor movement is one which is fragmented and that in order to address environmental issues such as climate change U.S. labor must first regain its own solidarity.