

Environmental Justice, the Green Economy, and the Politics of Diversity

In her *New York Times* article "In Environmental Push, Looking to Add Diversity" (3/9/09), Mireya Navarro interviewed members of white mainstream environmental groups, researchers/academics, activists, consultants, and members of the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement. The article addressed issues of diversity (aka racism) and the challenges and initiatives made by the mainstream environmental groups since being challenged in 1990 by leaders of the EJ movement in open letters to the 10 biggest mainstream environmental/conservation groups. The letters accused them of "racist" hiring practices. At that time there was, among all their collective staffs, only one person of color: an African American who did not hold a position of power. All those interviewed agreed that, in general, while some changes had taken place, deep substantial change had not occurred in the mainstream environmental organizations, their campaigns, ideology, or culture.

The article concluded with a statement by a green jobs leader that the EJ movement focused on "equal protection from bad stuff," whereas the green jobs movement groups want "equal access to good stuff." This particular characterization of the EJ movement's focus struck me. Is environmental racism not an issue in green jobs? Is environmental racism a thing of the past? Is justice not an issue when we talk of the green economy? Don't those of us who struggle for social, environmental, and economic justice struggle specifically because we want "equal access to the good stuff?"

As a woman of color from a poor, working-class background, I struggle against race, class, and gender realities almost every day of my life. I struggle precisely because I want "access to the good stuff" for our communities and myself. Yes, our communities would rather "just get along," but that is not the reality for the majority of poor and people of color. Many of our people still do not have high school educations. They are unemployed or underemployed, imprisoned or otherwise caught up in the legal system. Our communities continue to bear disproportionate environmental impacts to their health in their homes and schools, and in the workplace in low-paying, high-risk construction, industry, service, and farm worker jobs. Municipal planning and zoning

departments have long ago destined the best geographical areas for use by the middle and upper classes.

That the green economy will produce different jobs and clean energy will clearly give people and animals more time on Mother Earth, but will justice be achieved? Will green jobs raise us from poverty? Will they be safe, better paying, and offer better benefits? Or will our communities be the pawns, as those in power seek to assess and respond to the human carbon footprint? Who will bear the risks? Will there be a paradigm shift, or are we supposed to just go quietly along with the trend because it may mean jobs, funding and cultural capital for some? Recently I accessed a green jobs website. A young, handsome white man sat at his desk as the green jobs line was primed. He rose to greet a potential employee. The job seeker was a young Indian man. What is wrong with this picture? Why couldn't it be the other way around?

Little is said in the mainstream media about the fact that the U.S. leads the opposition to curbing greenhouse gases even in contrast to some other industrialized countries. Washington's carbon trading alternatives and its refusal to sign climate change initiatives show the world that the U.S. refuses to give up its culture of consumption or take responsibility for the waste it produces so that corporations can make amazing profits. We can only hope that our government can demonstrate a change in Copenhagen this month. Movements and peoples' organizations struggle against these decisions in national and international meetings with the hope of exposing the corporations, their practices, and the politicians who guarantee their profit margin. These activists and organizers struggle in the hope of reducing suffering from the bad stuff, and creating access to the good stuff.

With respect to diversity, today, there are more people of color in mainstream environmental groups. With few exceptions, many of these people of color are politicians, business people, consultants, or academics, whose acceptance offers cultural capital to the boards of these organizations. Those hired into these positions could well be what Edward Bonilla calls the "honorary whites," affluent people of color from third world countries, descendants of the *patrones*, and aspiring and ambitious technocrats who have an interest in the environment. In

either case, these people rarely come from the EJ movement, are familiar with its history, or are connected to a community to which they might be accountable.

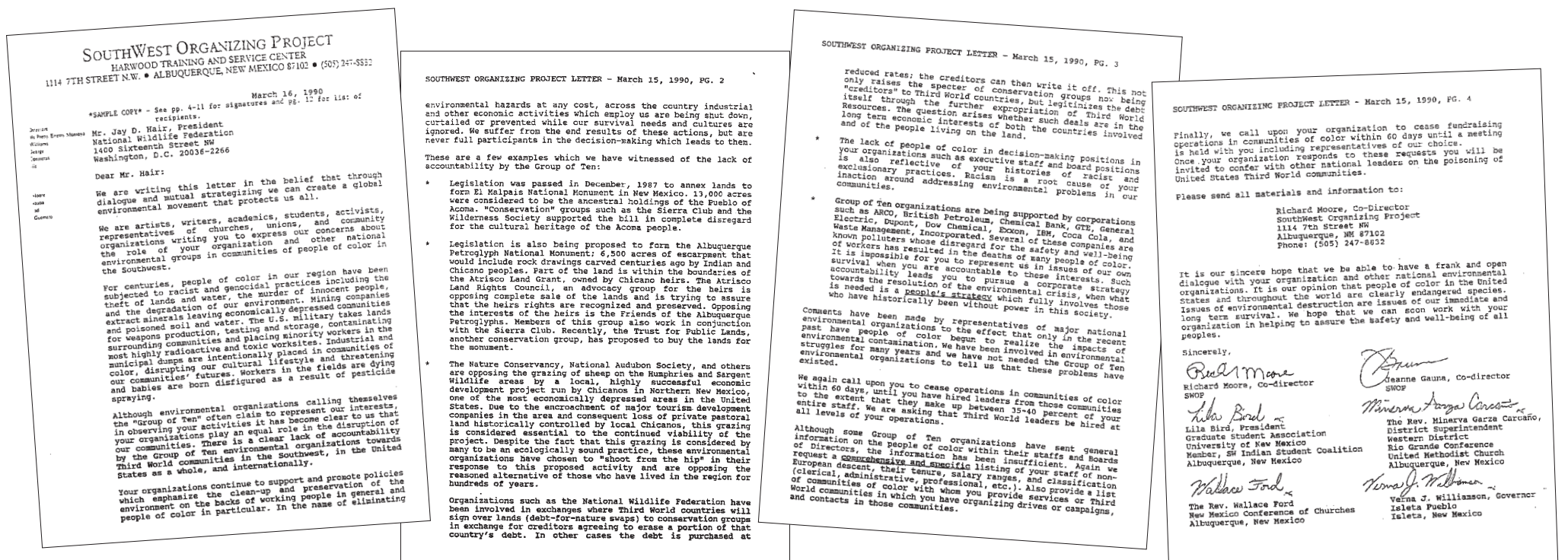
These folks are not bad people; they are good technocrats with credentials who are seeking opportunities for their own development. They are not necessarily committed to the Environmental Justice movement, nor accountable to the communities they represent. Oftentimes these people have nothing in common with the movement that created their place at the table, and have no sense of accountability or responsibility to a constituency. They are not usually change agents.

In my community in northern New Mexico, we continue to oppose a private landfill owner's effort to bring Special Waste (toxic wastes, including carcinogens) into our community. Those of us fighting this battle would prefer not to struggle "against the bad stuff," but we have no choice in the matter. We must struggle; and in our efforts we create community, solidarity, resiliency, and support for each other in fulfilling our goals and dreams. The landfill owner wants money, but we want a healthy, clean environment, livable wages, and to minimize threats to our health — we want the "good stuff."

In the last several years I have spent time in the uranium belt of New Mexico. The groups I have worked with organize around a variety of issues resulting from the uranium legacy of New Mexico. All have confronted environmental and economic racism, which has paralyzed our governments (state, federal, and native) from protecting their communities, holding polluters accountable to clean up these sites, and conducting research on health, water, air, and soil contamination.

Few native people have had access to the "good stuff": safe water, health services, uncontaminated soil, and healthy air. They have fought and endured the bad stuff for decades. Having borne more than 50 years of contamination from the mining and processing of uranium, communities continue to fight against the uranium corporations, which have never been forced to clean up their wastes. Communities continue to struggle for access to the "good stuff."

The reality is that inequity, like racism, is alive and well — these social constructions simply mutate over time under a system of unbridled capitalism, now known as globalization. This is the real challenge to humanity, even more so than climate change. Climate change, like racism, classism, and sexism, is the product of capitalism run amok. Because the faces have changed — the "honorary whites" have created many more dichotomies beyond the usual black and white one — it is more complicated distinguishing who the real exploiters are. For the poor and communities of color, survivors of this country's historical legacy, the question is: how do we get beyond these honorary whites so that we may get on with the business of access to the "good stuff" and "protection from the bad stuff?"



Letters to Group of Ten*

Excerpts of SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP), et al | (March 1990)

"For centuries, people of color in our region have been subjected to racist and genocidal practices including the theft of lands and water, the murder of our innocent people, and the degradation of our environment. Mining companies extract minerals leaving economically depressed communities and poisoned soil and water. The U.S. military takes lands for weapons production, testing and storage, contaminating surrounding communities and placing minority workers in the most highly radioactive and toxic worksites. Industrial and municipal dumps are intentionally placed in communities of color, disrupting our cultural lifestyle and threatening our communities' futures. Workers in the fields are dying and babies born disfigured as a result of pesticide spraying.

"Although environmental organizations calling themselves the 'Group of Ten' often claim to represent our interests, in observing your activities it has become clear to us that your organizations play an equal role in the disruption of our communities. There is a clear lack of accountability by the Group of Ten environmental organizations towards Third World communities in the Southwest, in the United States as a whole, and internationally.

"Your organizations continue to support and promote policies which emphasize the clean-up and preservation of the environment on the backs of working people in general and people of color in particular. In the name of eliminating environmental hazards at any cost, across the country industrial and other economic activities which employ us or being shut down, curtailed or prevented while our survival needs and cultures are being ignored. We suffer from the end results of these actions, but are never full participants in the decision-making which leads to them.

"Comments have been made by representatives of major national environmental organizations to the effect that only in the recent past have people of color begun to realize the impacts of environmental contamination. We have been involved in environmental struggles for many years and we have not needed the Group of Ten environmental organizations to tell us that these problems have existed."

Sample organizations list of the 100 Letter Signatories:

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| SouthWest Organizing Project | Centro Adelante Campesino (Sunshine, AZ) |
| New Mexico Conference of Churches | National Indian Youth Council (Albuquerque, NM) |
| Isleta Pueblo | Chickaloon Village Fish & Game Conservation Council (Chickaloon, AK) |
| Tonantzín Land Institute (Albuquerque, NM) | African American Environmental Service Project (Atlanta, GA) |
| Neighbors for a Toxic Free Community (Denver, CO) | Informe-SIDA (Austin, TX) |
| Texas Center for Policy Studies | Tucsonians for a Clean Environment (Tucson, AZ) |
| Native Americans for a Clean Environment (Tahlequah, OK) | Coalition for Economic Survival (West Hollywood, CA) |
| Maricopa County Organizing Project (Phoenix, AZ) | National Lawyers Guild (Culver City, CA) |
| Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste | Latin American Concilio (Reno, NV) |
| People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (Berkeley, CA) | Austin Latino Lesbian and Gay Organization (Austin, TX) |
| Southerners for Economic Justice (Durham, NC) | Boston Rainbow Coalition (Boston, MA) |
| National Council of Churches | Northern California Ecumenical Council (San Francisco, CA) |
| Campaign for Accessible Healthcare (Oakland, CA) | |

Recipients of "Group of Ten" Letter:

- Sierra Club
- Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund
- National Audubon Society
- National Wildlife Federation
- Environmental Defense Fund
- Environmental Policy Institute/Friends of the Earth
- Izaak Walton League
- The Wilderness Society
- National Parks and Conservation Association
- Natural Resources Defense Council

* There were actually three letters sent by members of the EJ movement to the top ten environmental groups in 1990. The first was sent by the Gulf Coast Tenant Leadership Development Project in New Orleans, the second was by the SouthWest Organizing Project in Albuquerque, and the third was a follow-up letter sent by the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ). In 1991, SNEEJ sent a fourth letter in this campaign to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to challenge its racist practices.

Funding of course is an issue here also, as some foundations would rather give their money to white organizations that work with communities of color, rather than give to small organizations from those communities. Mainstream conservation groups create their own "diversity" programs, which they can control rather than collaborating and sharing resources with community-based organizations.

How do we avoid foundation funding from changing our direction and ultimately our vision? Some foundations have simply said, "Don't even mention EJ if you want funding." It is instructive here to consider the book, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: The 501 (c) 3 Industrial Complex* (edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence). Funders are not exposed to the EJ realities that communities struggle with each day. The funders already have access to the good stuff, and seek to protect their

money. While some foundations want to help communities fight the bad stuff in order to obtain access to the good stuff, in the end, they impact the direction of our organizations, our politics, and our struggles for sovereignty. Foundations shape movements by choosing with whom they hire and consult, how they internalize the information they garner, and whom they will fund. Current funding trends have shied away from supporting both EJ and grassroots movements in general. Empowering communities is not something that the rich and privileged really want. They would rather have technocrats advise them on supposed "win-win" projects, rather than work with folks who will raise contradictions. It is easier to have the technocrats work on behalf of communities, rather than empower communities to sharpen their skills, support their research, and develop their right to speak for themselves.

Efforts to challenge power structures, alter paradigms, and create real change are a little scary. The "we speak for ourselves" mantra of the EJ movement has basically reinforced a lesson we already knew. If you want to speak for yourself, then you must fund yourself. The grassroots should take on the challenge and draw on our histories, cultures, and traditions of sustainability. We are the carriers of that knowledge. We understand that sustainability means interdependence, intergenerationality, and living within our habitat's capacity.

Sustainability is a lived experience for indigenous, aboriginal, and land-based peoples. It is what has developed the resiliency in our people to resist and survive colonialism, imperialism, and now, globalization. Low-income people of color throughout the world continue farming, tending, and harvesting animals and plants for consumption and medicinal uses in the shadows of corporations that exalt unrestrained consumption, profit, and environmental degradation. It is these land-based people and communities that protect our food chain and provide us with models of sustainability to reduce our carbon footprint.

These communities spoke out about their experiences with climate change long before Al Gore did his PowerPoint presentation and film. The Alaskan and Pacific Island peoples that spoke to this issue at the United Nations Conference on the Environment in 1992 in Brazil, and in international meetings since then, were not white, or privileged. These communities continue to confront governmental intransigence as they build power and knowledge among the masses of their peoples. They adapt to changes in Mother Earth. Community-based organizations, indigenous and aboriginal peoples are now more consistently attending UN meetings. They are networking, communicating, and like the multinational corporations, they too, are organizing on a global level. They organize under a sense of international interdependence, responsibility and solidarity, rather than the voraciousness of a cold, technocratic globalization that exploits the Earth of her remaining resources, attempting to create a global source of cheap labor.

The struggle for survival, resiliency, and access to rights continues as we build our communities in grassroots, humble ways, based on EJ principles, spiritual and lived experiences. Our histories show that these practices are sustainable and build community. Our communities do not want to be served up a green job that's little different from the stuff we've been served before. The new technocrats may be the mutated carpetbaggers, mercenaries, and gatekeepers of the past facilitating this transition period, and they come in all colors. In general for them class and race are no longer issues. For EJ communities and our progressive allies, well, we continue to build the kind of grassroots movement that is necessary to make real change here and throughout the world.

— Sofia Martinez

