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INTRODUCTION

This double issue of Radical America has the politics of environmental activism as its primary focus. It reflects our interest in contributing to a radical perspective on the environmental problems facing us today and the ways in which they can be challenged.

Historically, the Left has not been quick to appreciate the problems that industrialization has created for the world’s ecology. Indeed, leftists have frequently criticized conservationism as elitist or at best liberal. Certainly radicals had an appropriate cynicism toward the romanticism of rural, “natural” life which has often characterized conservation campaigns. Certainly save-the-environment campaigns until the last decade appealed mainly to white upper-middle-class people while problems of poverty and discrimination seemed more pressing to others. But at root the blindness of the Left to environmental issues stemmed from deeper flaws in its (Marxist) tradition: the view that “real” liberation came only from attacking workplace exploitation, and the view that industrial development and technology were always ultimately progressive and in the interests of the working class.

Today several aspects of our relation to environmentalism have changed. Concretely, new and by no means elite constituencies have been forced into action to protect themselves.
Moreover, a critique of the Marxist tradition of “productionism”—the more development the better—has deepened and spread on the Left, driven forward particularly by the cultural radicalism of the New Left and by feminism.

Historically, leftists have seen industrial development as a precursor to (and an inherent aspect of) workers’ liberation. Environmental radicals today, however, are questioning not only who should control industry but what types of technological development will benefit us, what kinds of products are necessary, and what kinds of risks we are willing to sustain. In fact, the questioning goes deeper: at what point does technological development not advance the material conditions of human life but degrade them? The nuclear industry exemplifies the significance of these questions. Uranium mining, primarily on Native American lands, causes grave health problems for miners. Those in the immediate area also undergo a high risk of cancer and related disease from the uranium tailings left after the mining and milling operations. The resulting ore is used either in nuclear power plants (threatening the health of surrounding communities) or in nuclear weapons (threatening human survival). And at the end of the uranium “cycle” the nuclear wastes are impossible to store safely, posing new health problems for countless generations in the future. Perhaps, environmentalists suggest, we should leave the uranium undisturbed—do we need it so badly as to create such threats?

If there is one point that is made clearly in this issue, we hope it is the fact that, in recent decades, the state of the natural environment has become closely intertwined with questions of human health. Modern environmentalism, as Jim O’Brien argues in his article, is in part a grassroots public health movement. Most of the articles in this issue, in fact, have to do primarily with environmental threats to human health rather than with more traditional issues of nature preservation. To say this, however, is not to say that only the health issues are important. The fusion of the two kinds of concern has given environmentalism a force greater than it would have by focusing on only preservation or only health. The link between the two is provided by a sense of ecology, a sense of human beings’ place in the overall balance of nature. As Winona LaDuke points out in her article on Native Americans and environmental issues, this kind of notion has long been present in Indian cultures. It is a theme that modern environmentalism has picked up, though with distressingly little concrete linkage with the Indians who are trying to protect their remaining lands today.

A related theme in this issue of Radical America is that modern-day environmental concerns are shared by a far wider segment of society than the traditional stereotyped upper-middle-class “birdwatchers.” The Reagan administration has tried to label environmentalists as “elitists,” but the label simply does not fit the vast array of people who have been moved to activism by the environmental problems of the modern world. We think the articles in this issue give a good sense of the breadth of modern-day environmentalism. To speak of this breadth is not to deny that there are class differences within the movement, but simply to insist that the movement can no longer be defined in terms of the specific concerns of its more affluent participants.

A theme running through several of the articles, most notably the review-essay of the chemical spill in Seveso, Italy, is the fallacy of relying on scientific expertise in confronting environmental problems. A misplaced faith in science can often deter people from trusting their own fears and their own common sense. As Barbara Smith argues in her article on the Black
Lung movement in West Virginia, the miners’ common-sense understanding of the link between their work and their lung diseases was far more reliable than the tortured arguments of medical researchers over the exact definition of “black lung disease.” Likewise, Ken Geiser’s article on local struggles over toxic chemicals warns against letting corporations or governmental agencies entangle the issue in a maze of scientific studies.

It is in the Third World that the connections between environmental protection and human health are often clearest. In an interview published in this issue, Jim Brophy discusses the effects of chemical pesticides in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and the steps being taken to deal with them in Nicaragua. The interview focuses on the dynamics of a society in revolution—the problems and the promises that it contains. It is a view that has nothing in common with the grotesque caricatures being pushed by the US government. A point which we might add here is that environmental issues in the Third World are not so remote from our own lives. The classic case of environmental spillover is the American use of Agent Orange as a defoliant in Vietnam; in addition to the hideous effects it has had on the land and people of Vietnam, it has caused severe health problems for American veterans. Likewise, farm products grown in Central America with the use of dangerous American-made pesticides are often shipped back for sale in the US.

There are many different aspects of environmental activism, and many different perspectives which feed it. We’ve addressed some but by no means all of them. For example, there is no systematic inquiry into the connection between environmentalism and feminism, although they are intertwined. The antinuclear movement in particular has been decisively influenced by feminism and by women’s leadership; the movement against toxic wastes has also relied heavily on women’s organizing at every level, though the influence of feminism is less readily visible. Another gap in the issue may be the absence of a specific discussion of the relationship between environmentalism and jobs. Richard Kazis and Richard L. Grossman discuss this issue insightfully in their recent book Fear at Work (Pilgrim Press, 1982), showing how companies try to use “job blackmail” to forestall not only environmental safeguards but also improvements in working conditions.

Even if this issue of Radical America were several times longer than it is, we could not hope to do justice to the scope of present-day environmentalism. Perhaps the most useful generalization to be made about it is that for all its disparity, it is an activist movement. It has shown an almost endless creativity in its tactics and an astonishing persistence in the face of efforts to either intimidate or co-opt it. There can no longer be doubt that environmentalism is much more than a fad, much more than a hobby. It is composed of people who, from a great variety of vantage points, are fighting back in a determined manner against threats to the balance of nature and to their own health.
ENVIRONMENTALISM AS A MASS MOVEMENT:

Historical Notes

Jim O'Brien

It is a long-established cliche that environmentalists are social elitists. As a report by the House Republican Study Committee put it last year, "environmentalists tend to be members of the affluent upper-middle class, termed the leisure class." Interior Secretary James Watt has argued that America’s natural resources "should not be denied to the people by elitist groups." No attack on environmentalism, no proposal to loot the country’s natural assets, is complete without a phony-populist sneer at those who try to defend the environment.

At the same time, anyone with the slightest nodding acquaintance with current events can recognize that environmentalism is currently a very popular cause in the US. The resignation or firing of more than twenty top officials of the Environmental Protection Agency as a result of investigations into the Reagan appointees’ handling of toxic wastes is a tribute to the breadth and depth of public concerns about environmental health. Secretary Watt has consistently failed to win public or Congressional support for his plans to open up wilderness areas for mining and development. The Reagan administration came into office expecting to find broad support for its attacks on environmental regulations, but instead it has gotten massive popular resistance. Clearly there is something wrong with the label “elitist” as applied to present-day environmentalism. Yet the label would never have become a cliche if
there were not some historical truth to it. In the antecedents of modern environmentalism we can easily find evidence of social narrowness and class snobbery. In trying to understand the movement today, we cannot simply take for granted the fact that it is a mass movement. We have to probe the reasons why it became one.

Crucial to my argument is a distinction between environmentalism and the traditional conservation movement. Conservation as a social movement began in the late nineteenth century and it won its landmark victories mainly between the 1890s and the 1930s. It was never a mass movement. In the 1960s, however, a much broader movement that is commonly called environmentalism grew up. It has had a dual character: in part it has been a mushrooming of the traditional conservation movement, under favorable conditions for growth, but in part it has been a grass-roots public health movement. The common bond between these two themes has been a new ecological sense of human beings as part of a delicate balance of nature.

Conservation

Advocates of conservation—chiefly hunting and fishing enthusiasts at first—began organizing in the US in the 1870s. By the end of the century they had started winning a string of successes that, by the time of World War II, added up to a stunning monument to their efforts. In a nation whose watchword was free enterprise, enormous areas of land were owned and regulated by the federal government. From the Rockies on west, most forest land was publicly owned. Under protective laws, some game animals were more numerous than at the turn of the century, despite a great increase in the human population. Songbirds were protected altogether from shooting. America boasted
“The greatest good for the greatest number over the long run,” sought to define conservation exclusively as the efficient long-term management of resources. The issue was not the aesthetics of nature but the defense of material resources against short-term plunder. For Pinchot and other Progressive conservationists of the early twentieth century, national well-being was in grave jeopardy from irresponsible businessman who, if left to their own devices, would extract their profits and leave a wasteland. Time and again, conservationists in the Pinchot mold sought to rally public opinion against “the interests” who stood in the way of careful resource management. “The alliance between business and politics is the most dangerous thing in our political life,” Pinchot thundered. “It is the snake that we must kill. The special interests must get out of politics, or the American people will put them out of business. There is no third course.”

The second wing of the conservation movement is more interesting for our purposes. It had to do with nature, not as a factor of production, but as an amenity—something to be enjoyed. The nature writer John Muir (1838-1914), who carried enjoyment to the point of worship, was the best-known exponent of this approach to conservation. More than anyone else, Muir inspired the type of thinking that led to the steady growth of the national parks, where mining, lumbering, and other forms of economic development were to be excluded. Where Pinchot once called forests “a manufacturing plant for the production of wood,”" Muir accorded them a mystical significance. “I never saw a discontented tree,” he wrote. “They grip the ground as though they loved it.” Symbolically, the last big battle of Muir’s life was one that pitted him against Pinchot and many other Progressive conservationists. Muir and his allies tried to save the beauti-

ful Hetch-Hetchy Valley in California’s Yosemite National Park from being turned into a reservoir to provide hydroelectric power to San Francisco. It was a classic struggle between two versions of conservation, and Muir lost. Still, the preservationist impulses that Muir articulated were not simply futile pieties. Some of the biggest victories of the conservation movement came from the efforts of people who sought to enjoy and contemplate nature, not to ensure its most efficient use as a resource. Besides the national parks, their achievements included game laws and the protection of endangered birds. Small but influential, this wing of the conservation movement included not only mystics like Muir but participants in sport hunting and fishing who loved the outdoors no less than the hikers did.
The nature-enjoyment wing of conservation should be seen as the political edge of a very deep-rooted “back to nature” romantic mood in the fast-urbanizing America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was an age of suburbs, of city parks, of country clubs, of the growth of hunting and fishing as mass sports (“Man and boy, the American is a fisherman,” said Herbert Hoover⁴), of the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, of a huge market for “nature writers.” It was an age when a Methodist bishop could claim that “the out-of-doorsiness” of Jesus gave Christianity present-day relevance: Jesus was “the most out-of-doors man who ever lived.” This kind of fascination with nature was a new phenomenon among white Americans; since Columbus, the emphasis had always been on “conquering” and “harnessing” nature. Now, however, the very growth of congested cities was producing a discovery of the aesthetic charms of the natural world. Even though the organized conservation groups remained small (not until the Izaak Walton League emerged in the 1920s was there a group that could number its members in the tens of thousands), their message had a resonance in American society.

In some ways it is hard to characterize the class politics of the conservation movement, enmeshed as it was in this very widespread “back to nature” ambience. One point that should be made clear at the outset is that some of the very wealthiest figures in American industry took a hand in the nature-enjoyment wing of conservation. Henry Ford helped win federal protection for migratory birds. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., spent vast sums to advance the protection of scenic areas. The railroad tycoon E.H. Harriman helped his friend John Muir win legislative approval for Yosemite National Park. The list could go on, and it would include arch-capitalists like Jay Gould, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and J. Pierpont Morgan.¹⁰ These people were not active in organized conservation groups like the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, Izaak Walton League, or Boone and Crockett Club, but acting on their own they did use their enormous wealth and influence to further the cause that these groups were working for.

Even when we look at the rank and file of the conservation movement we have to conclude that it was in large part the product of new wealth generated by the growth of American capitalism. Industrialization, with the growth of national and international markets, was producing an unprecedented number of urban capitalists, managers, and professionals who had
money and leisure time to devote to out-of-the-way amenities. They were the ones who could afford to live in the new grassy suburbs, who could take vacations out of town, who provided the market for books and magazine articles about nature. However much some of the active conservationists may have deplored the “materialism” and “philistinism” of industrialized America, for the most part they were clearly a part of it.

The point becomes clearer when we look at the question of who was not in the conservation movement. Farmers were not and—more significantly in the long haul—working-class people were not. They were excluded from the social milieu in which the conservation groups operated. For example, sport hunters were the earliest active conservationists, and the ideology of sport hunting was based on implicit social distinctions. Sport hunters were to be set apart (by their ethics, their expensive dress, and their esoteric vocabulary—“covey” of quail, “pack of grouse,” “wisp” of snipe, and so on) from those who killed game for money or because they needed the meat. As the leading sportsman’s manual of the mid-nineteenth century put it, describing the “pot hunters” who killed game in order to eat the food, they were “the most disgusting, the most selfish, the most unmanly, the most heartless” of hunters.11

Forest and Stream, the most important early conservation-minded journal, claimed that “the game of this country belongs to the sportsman . . . . It is his and he shall have it.”12

The cities of that era were filled with a new immigrant proletariat, and the search for “nature” on the part of middle- and upper-class urbanites alike was often partly an effort to escape contact with this new working class. There was a strong tinge of anti-immigrant racism in the conservation movement. Madison Grant, the leading propagandist for cutting off immigration from southern and eastern Europe, was an influential conservationist.13 Daniel Beard, founder of the Boy Scouts, drew cartoons of “game hogs” with, he said, “plenty of black curly hair, cigarettes and earrings.”14 William Hornaday, a leading conservationist and director of the Bronx Zoo, put it in 1913 that “All members of the lower classes of southern Europe are a dangerous menace to our wildlife.” The Italians, he warned, “are spreading, spreading, spreading.”15

Throughout this period (and afterwards) conservation groups were in large part social clubs. Members went on outings together, whether to hunt, to fish, to watch birds, or to sleep out under the stars. The implications for cross-class participation are obvious. Even when the Izaak Walton League sprang up in the Midwest in the 1920s, quickly gaining a membership many times larger than any of the other groups, its base was limited. A typical chapter, historian Stephen Fox has written, resembled “a Rotary Club that liked to go fishing.”16

In standard political terms, the nature-enjoyment wing of the conservation movement was well to the right of the Pinchot resource-management wing. Progressives like Pinchot at least claimed to speak for everybody. They were unambiguously part of the broader political reform impulses of their era, while many participants in the nature-enjoyment wing were quite conservative on issues unrelated to the preservation of nature.

When all this is said, however, there still remains a sense in which the back-to-nature conservationists were speaking on behalf of impulses that cut across class lines. For urban working-class people, the problem was not so much a lack of interest in natural surroundings as a lack of access to them. This was an era when the eight-hour day was only gradually being won, when the normal work week includ-
Outline of World History. By Jay N. "Ding" Darling, a leading voice of traditional conservation.
ed Saturday, and when even two-week summer vacations were a privilege of the relatively small white-collar workforce. And money was limited. A study of working-class living standards in New York in 1907 found that the families spent an average of $8.50 a year on recreation, and that 10 percent of the families spent no money at all for recreation. As for interest in the out of doors, it should be remembered that the new urban immigrants came typically from the European countryside, and that both industrial discipline and the overcrowded conditions of American cities were alien to them. There was nothing peculiarly upper- or middle-class about a love of the outdoors. Later in the century, as the American economy changed and as working-class people got more access to nature, it would become clear that they valued it. For all their narrowness and snobbery, participants in the nature-enjoyment wing of traditional conservation laid the groundwork for a far broader movement than they were able to build (or were interested in building) themselves.

The Transformation of Public Health

In tracing the historical roots of modern environmentalism, it is not enough to look solely at the traditional conservation movement. After all, the environmental movement of the past two decades has functioned in part as a grass-roots public health movement, responding to poisons created by modern American industrial technology. In this light, if we are to understand environmentalism, we have to ask why this public health movement (rarely given that name) has grown up as part of the larger environmental movement, rather than having a momentum of its own. In order to answer this question, we have to take a brief look at public health as it has been understood and adminis-tered in the US during the twentieth century.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the traditional conservation movement was winning its impressive triumphs, major reforms were also instituted in the area of public health. And these reforms had far more of a cross-class impact than did the achievements of the conservation movement. But the "public health movement," as it was sometimes called, had a self-limiting quality. In the wake of its greatest achievements, it was unable to move on effectively to deal with new kinds of diseases. Ironically, the very scientific breakthroughs that brought success also narrowed its vision.

Today the theory that certain diseases are carried by germs is taken for granted. It is hard to put ourselves back into an era when this theory was only beginning to be established. Yet a standard history of public health in the Western world has this to say:

It must be kept in mind that until the 1880's and even later there was firmly implanted in both the lay and the medical mind the idea that disease was caused by dirt. Translation of this idea into practical consequence took the form of specific measures intended essentially to eliminate filth and to improve the physical environment, especially of the poorer classes. Under the impetus of this notion, important steps were taken in the late nineteenth century to deal with problems of overcrowding, defective plumbing, and poor ventilation in the tenement districts of cities, in America as well as Europe. And in fact, this activity had the effect of reducing the toll of contagious diseases, even before the actual causes of the diseases were discovered. Public health in this framework had the aspect of a popular crusade, aimed at making the newly swollen cities safe for every-
one to live in. Just as the “back to nature” movement sought, in a variety of ways, escape from the cities, the public health movement sought to make the cities themselves livable. They were two different responses to the new conditions of urban America; they were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but of the two responses, the public health movement clearly had much more relevance to the lives of working-class people.

At the same time, the late nineteenth century also saw the definitive breakthroughs in the establishment of an alternative theory of contagious diseases. The work of Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, and other medical scientists identified, in the span of a few decades, the specific microorganisms responsible for some of the most deadly diseases in human history. In the 1880s and 1890s alone, specific organisms were found for typhoid, malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, dysentery, and bubonic plague, among others. With the consequent working out of immunization programs for a range of contagious diseases, and programs to sterilize municipal drinking water and marketed milk, astounding reductions in human mortality were achieved in the US. In New York City, for example, the infant death rate went from 273 per 1,000 live births in 1885 to 94 per 1,000 in 1915.19 In the country as a whole, between 1875 and 1940 the percentage of people born who could be expected to survive to age sixty-five went from 32.5 percent to 69.5 percent.20

Such an achievement was staggering. For purposes of our analysis, though, its most important feature was the way it transformed the nature of public health. The change was not immediate, but with the passage of time public health became less a citizens’ crusade and more a medical specialty. Diseases were found to have specific causes and specific cures, which could be discovered by scientific researchers and administered by public health professionals. However uneasily, public health came under the wing of “organized medicine,” one of the most conservative forces in American political life.

As germ-carried diseases became less lethal, and as better programs of infant care and nutrition took effect, degenerative illnesses such as heart disease and cancer began coming to the fore as the chief causes of incapacity and death. They are not carried by specific organisms that can be found and identified; instead, they are changes in the body catalyzed by the environment in which people find themselves. In the case of cancer, which has become increasingly important over time, it is the physical environment that seems to be all-important. And even when the effects of longer life expectancy are allowed for (more people are bound to get cancer because they haven’t died earlier from other diseases), the incidence of cancer has increased notably in recent decades.21 But human environments are so complex, and poisons may be coming from so many different directions, that pinpointing exact “causes” is very hard. The techniques that worked so spectacularly in relation to diseases like cholera and yellow fever have often produced nothing but frustration when applied to diseases like cancer.

The area of occupational health illustrates the way in which the old methods of public health had little relevance to the diseases that were now most common. It is not that there was no attention paid to industrial hygiene. But in the absence of a verifiable “cause” for an illness—one which, after all, may have built up in the body over a period of twenty years or more—passivity and neglect were often the response. Asbestos is a good example. Daniel Barman writes in Death on the Job that the first case of cancer from asbestos exposure was diagnosed in 1906, and that “by 1918 US and Canadian
life insurance companies had stopped selling personal life insurance policies to asbestos workers." Yet that was on the eve of a sustained boom for the asbestos industry, which was accountable to no one for its hazards. By the 1970s, an estimated ninety thousand people were working directly with asbestos in the US, and another 5 million were working daily with asbestos-containing materials. Workers' compensation programs, developed in the early twentieth century (partially as a way for companies to avoid lawsuits from injured workers), stressed accidents much more than disease. So easy was it for companies to deny responsibility for diseases that, as Mimi Conway recently summarized, "Although 100,000 Americans die annually as a result of occupational disease, not more than 500 cases a year are compensated through the workers' compensation system." Even the occupational diseases that seem to present the most cut-and-dried patterns of occurrence, such as black lung among coal miners and byssinosis ("brown lung") among textile workers, were neglected because there was no objective proof as to what caused them.

By the time of World War II, public health in the US was no longer a broad-based popular crusade; it was in the hands of medical professionals who were constituted as watchdogs over society's health. In some areas they performed with stunning success, but in others they did not. These latter areas were important, and as time went on they were to become more important.

The Roots of a New Movement

World War II was a watershed in American industry. It brought a need for a feverishly high level of production at the same time that access to many natural products was restricted. It gave an impetus to products like DDT, other chemical pesticides, artificial fertilizers, oil-based synthetic fibers, and a host of new plastic goods. It also introduced nuclear fission as a source of energy. Postwar prosperity kept up the pressure for constant innovation, and in particular for a rapid-fire proliferation of new chemicals. The chemical industry transformed American manufacturing in ways that have been little understood, and whose toxic effects may never be fully understood.

It is tempting to consider the explosive rise of environmentalism in the past two decades as simply a natural response to an unprecedented barrage of new industrial poisons and new threats to the earth's fragile chain of life. And there would be a germ of truth in this notion. But no social movement can ever be explained solely in terms of what it is reacting against; the readiness of people to react must also be explained. And so must their readiness to react in particular ways. In exploring the roots of environmentalism, the most useful starting point may not be with the fact that the environment was being threatened, but with the fact that American society was changing in ways that made possible a mass response to the environmental threats.

The long prosperity after World War II was crucial in giving environmentalism its start. It
meant that more Americans had more money to spend on amenities, including the enjoyment of nature. The “back to nature” mood of an earlier era now carried with it the means to fulfillment on a mass scale. The Automobile Age arrived in earnest, and use of national parks was just one indicator of the greater access to natural scenery that people were enjoying. The total number of visitors went from 12 million to 19 million in 1950 and 37 million in 1960.26 Overnight visits to state parks jumped from 3 million in 1946 to double that number in 1950 and over 20 million in 1960.27 Lighter equipment helped put backpacking within more people’s reach. Improvements in camera equipment and binoculars helped facilitate the growing popularity of nature photography and bird watching. Vacation homes on seashores and in woodlands became more common. Rapid advances in color photography not only facilitated the production of “nature guides,” but made nature into a product that could be enjoyed in a movie theater or a living room. The popularity of the Walt Disney nature films in the 1950s was an early sign of what color photography could do. Soon, in the early 1960s, books of nature photography were to become important tools of conservationist education and propaganda. The rapid spread of color TV in the late 1960s would make possible the “consumption” of nature on an utterly unprecedented scale.

Needless to say, access to nature was not equally distributed. Especially where it involved foreign travel—as in the growing popularity of tours to places like the Galapagos Islands and the East African game parks—nature enjoyment still had aspects of class privilege. But with increased leisure time, much greater discretionary income, and widespread car ownership, it became much easier for everyone to get out into the countryside. There is a world of difference between working six ten-hour days a week with no summer vacation and virtually no money to spend on recreation, as was often the case at the turn of the century, and working five eight-hour days with a week or two off in the summer and with money enough to buy a car. This is not to say that tastes in outdoor recreation were the same across class lines: in general, working-class people were more likely to value exercise and sociability along with fresh air, less likely to value privacy and the enjoyment of undiluted natural surroundings. But the differences were less important than the fact that access to nature was far more widely distributed among urban Americans than it had ever been.
before. Never before had so many people believed, and acted on the belief, that nature was something to be enjoyed rather than to be used for the production of material goods.

None of the organized conservation groups developed a mass base during this period (before the mid-1960s, that is), but they grew. The Audubon Society grew from fewer than 8,000 members at the end of the war to 12,000 in 1951 and 41,000 in 1962. The Sierra Club went from 4,000 to 7,000 by 1950, and then doubled by the end of the fifties. All the groups remained small by today’s standards, but the point is that in the favorable postwar environment they were multiplying. And they were effective. The Sierra Club led a prolonged and successful fight to stop a proposed dam in Dinosaur National Monument—the same kind of fight that John Muir lost in 1914. Different groups brought pressure on Congress to set aside large areas of the public lands as wilderness areas, free from development, and they won passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

More significant in a way than the size of the conservation movement in the 1950s was its perspective. It was specifically the nature-enjoyment wing of traditional conservation that retained its status as a crusade after the 1930s. Pinchot-style resource management had come out of the Progressive era and the New Deal with a full range of government agencies mandated to carry out its principles. Its last great victory was the Tennessee Valley Authority, created under President Franklin Roosevelt to bring public power and regional planning to one of the poorest areas of the nation. After that, all the structures were in place; whatever their ancestry, the agencies took on a bureaucratic logic of their own. Typically, they either let themselves be guided by the most powerful of the private interests that they dealt with or

else sought above all else to enhance their own size and spheres of operation. The Tennessee Valley Authority became the country’s biggest patron and defender of strip mining, paying no heed to the immense destruction being done to the hills, streams, and farms of Appalachia. The Bureau of Reclamation, like the older Army Corps of Engineers, elbowed scenic and recreational values to one side as it pursued a narrowly defined course of all-out economic development. The resource-management version of conservation had lost all vestiges of a citizens’ movement, all vestiges of an attack on entrenched privilege. It was only the nature-enjoyment wing of conservation that sought to appeal to the popular imagination in the decades after World War II. And it was this wing of conservation that helped give rise to environmentalism in the 1960s.

The Birth of Environmentalism

The immense popularity of Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* (1962) signalled the emergence of a qualitatively new social movement in the 1960s. The book crystallized two themes that were to be crucial to environmentalism: (1) nature has a delicate balance and (2) humans are part of it. Neither one was an original idea, needless to say, but by applying them to a salient aspect of modern technology the author gave them a powerful political twist. The first theme expressed the extent to which, for a large number of people, the appreciation of nature had broadened into a sense of ecology, that is, the web of interdependencies in particular natural environments. Carson’s book showed, for example, how the same insecticides that killed off crop-eating insects also killed their natural enemies, and that it was the crop eaters that were likely to recoup their numbers fastest. In years to come “ecology” became a rallying cry,
not to mention a cliche, within the environmentalist movement. The very word “environmentalism,” far more than “conservation,” conveys a sense of the totality of nature with all its complex interrelationships.

Carson’s second theme—the vulnerability of humans to disturbances in the natural order—brought the ecological argument home. She argued that human health was being endangered by the overuse of new chemical pesticides, many of them resistant to the normal breaking-down processes of nature. The book was not only an exposition of ecology but also a tract on public health; by weaving the two themes together, Carson gave them a force they would never have had by themselves. In the absence of a vibrant public health movement in the US, *Silent Spring* would never have gotten the reception it did if it had focused only on the health issue. It was by drawing on her reputation as a nature writer, and by keeping the theme of nature’s balance clearly to the fore, that she was able to draw so many readers into her argument. Her book presupposed—and rightly so—the existence of a large public that cared about nature.

Fiercely attacked by the chemical industry, *Silent Spring* defined the first major battleground of 1960s environmentalism: chemical pesticides. The fight dragged on for years, and while the federal government did eventually ban DDT and several other notably long-lasting poisons, overall use of chemical pesticides has continued to grow apace. The combined forces of agribusiness and the chemical industry have simply been too powerful for environmentalists to overcome. So in the long run the meaning of the pesticide fight lies less in its immediate results than in the social energies it set in motion. For those who engaged in the fight against pesticides, or who merely followed it sympathetically, it dramatized the way in which modern technology and major economic interests were posing a threat both to the natural environment and to human beings. A new movement was emerging, one with a strong component of traditional conservationist concerns, but also with a keen sense of the delicate bal-
ance of nature and of human vulnerability to
changes in the physical environment.

Starting in the mid-1960s, on a small scale at
first, the environmental movement began to
win tangible victories in the courts and in the
legislative arena. By the early 1970s, despite the
presence of a conservative Republican, Richard
Nixon, in the White House, the momentum of
environmental reform was such that a string of
important bills had been passed into law. These
included the National Environmental Policy
Act of 1970, requiring environmental-impact
statements on all developmental projects; cre-
ation of the Environmental Protection Agency,
which quickly became the largest federal regu-
latory body; a series of Clean Air acts; the
Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970;
and the Water Pollution Act of 1972, aimed at
making the nation’s rivers “swimmable and
fishable” in little more than a decade. There
was no historical precedent for this sudden suc-
cession of legislative victories.

The environmental movement fed on its suc-
cesses. Perhaps the most important aspect of
the legal victories was that they provided citizen
interveners a way of asserting the public inter-
est in environmental protection. They could go
to court and they could go to the new regu-
latory agencies, and they would have to be
given a hearing. In effect, decision making con-
cerning the environment was made far more
democratic. While some new environmental
groups focused their energies on mobilizing
legal talent, other groups used their involve-
ment in political/legal battles to increase their
memberships. The growth was impressive. The
Audubon Society went from 45,000 members in
1966 to 321,500 in 1975, with a jump of almost
1,000 members in the year 1970-71 alone. The
Sierra Club went from 35,000 to 147,000 from
1966 to 1975. The National Wildlife Federation
(the biggest group but often the most cautious
because of varied interests within its ranks) and
the Wilderness Society also more than doubled
their memberships.30

Composition of the New Movement

The growth of the traditional conservation
groups did not, in itself, represent a broadening
of their social base. A Sierra Club membership
poll in 1972 showed that, in the households to
which club members belonged, the main wage
earner in over half of them was a professional.
In almost one-fifth, it was a manager or execu-
tive, while the main wage earner in only 9 per-
cent of the households was a clerical or blue-
collar worker. Over half the club members sur-
veyed had completed some graduate work.31
Similarly, Audubon Society members polled in
1976 had an average income of $35,700; 85 per-
cent of them had gone to college and 43 percent
to graduate school.32 For the most part, even as
the traditional conservation groups broadened
their concerns in the environmental era, their
growth was chiefly a matter or reaching more
deeply than ever into their established consti-
tuencies.

Still, popular support for the new cause of
environmentalism was extraordinarily broad.
Earth Day in April 1970, observed primarily in
colleges and schools but in a wide variety of
other settings as well, provided startling evi-
dence that the environmental movement had
struck a popular nerve. “Now, suddenly, every-
body is a conservationist,” said the Audubon
Society magazine.33 Recognizing that there was
no point in appearing to oppose the
movement’s broad goals, President Nixon pro-
claimed the 1970s “the environmental decade.”
It may have seemed for a time as if environ-
mentalism would become the political equiva-
lent of an Easter Seal campaign—something
that offended nobody and that nobody would oppose. Of course, as issues became more sharply defined, and as costs became more clear, environmental issues became battle-grounds. What became crucial was not the degree of popular support for the general goals of environmentalism, but actual participation in environmental battles. There were two ways in which, during the course of the 1970s, the movement became, not simply bigger than the traditional conservation movement had been, but broader. First, environmentalism got an influx of young people whose generally middle-class backgrounds were often less important than their alienation from the course of modern American society. Second, especially in recent years, struggles over occupational health and the dumping of toxic wastes have given the movement a small but significant working-class component. Both of these developments are important.

Earth Day in 1970 had dramatically announced the extent to which the new environmentalism was resonating among young people. Rallies took place at fifteen hundred college campuses. Earth Day was very quickly overshadowed by a nationwide student strike protesting the sending of American troops into Cambodia a week later, but in the long run it was still significant. Already, the protracted Vietnam war had inclined young people to distrust the “authorities” who told them that everything was going along smoothly. In the student revolt of the late 1960s there was a strong component of rebellion against the seemingly lifeless career choices that students faced in American society. The environmental message—that America was headed for disaster through its mindless materialism and its reckless disregard for the balances of the natural world—made ready sense in this context. And after 1970, as President Nixon’s “Vietnamiza-

tion” of the war reduced the number of American casualties and began to cool down the campus antiwar movement, a lot of young people who might earlier have worked on opposing the war began turning to environmental causes.

Environmentalism is so disparate that it is hard to speak of a distinctive youthful component to the movement. But clearly the influx of young people has provided a leavening to the movement—given it a volatility that traditional conservation never had. The flowering of a mass-based activist movement against nuclear power in the late 1970s, starting with civil disobedience and mass arrests in Seabrook, New Hampshire, in 1976 and 1977, is a clear example. At that time the antinuclear movement was first and foremost a movement of young people, frightened and angry at nuclear power and impatient with the “proper channels” to which protesters had hitherto been confined. Similarly, Greenpeace, a militant new environmental group founded in British Columbia in 1970 and best known for its fight against whaling, is another example of the way in which youthful recruits to the environmental movement have strengthened its willingness to violate laws and engage in unconventional tactics generally.

Politically, the youthful militant component of environmentalism has added at times a tinge of radicalism, a readiness to connect environmental activism with other grievances against “the system.” By constantly raising the stakes, as on the nuclear power issue, young people have helped keep environmentalism from being the orderly movement that Richard Nixon had in mind when he sought to roll with the punch in the early seventies. In the environmental movement there has been more than a trace of the class-blind but imaginative and militant radicalism of the 1960s New Left.

And the women’s liberation movement that
like Jane Fonda and Helen Caldicott, but it has been most marked at the local level. A study in 1979 found that women outnumbered men by two to one among local antinuclear leaders.14

Finally, it has also been among younger recruits to the environmental movement that an openness to American Indian influences has principally been found. Traditional conservationists had often expressed admiration for Indians and for ecological aspects of indigenous religions, but it was an admiration detached from any linkage to the ongoing problems of actual Indians. In the 1970s the emergence of Indian militancy, symbolized by the battles at Wounded Knee ten years ago, has provided an ongoing challenge to sympathetic whites. Inevitably, given the lust of major corporations for the uranium, coal, and other resources found on and under Indian lands, environmental issues have been a major part of the struggles waged by the American Indian Movement and by militant members of particular tribes. In general, there has been distressingly little coordination between environmentalists and Indian militants. But a significant number of white sympathizers have worked with Indian groups in defending their treaty rights and in resisting the destruction of their remaining reservation lands. And among youthful environmentalists more generally there has been an openness to the radically different perspective on the natural world enunciated by militant Indian traditionalists. This influence has fed into the tendency within parts of the environmental movement to find deep-going faults in the structure of American capitalist society.

Just as important as the accession of young people (who have added numbers, a frequent militancy, and a greater radicalism to the movement) has been the unmistakable broadening of the class base of environmentalism. The first
important event marking this development was the West Virginia black lung strike of 1969, which led to both state and federal legislation giving benefits to many sufferers from the traditional crippling disease of coal miners. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 purported to provide for uniform nationwide standards governing workplace conditions, and throughout its uneven career the act has been a rallying point for trade unionists concerned with their health and safety. Iron-
ically, the Nixon administration's wage freeze of the early 1970s may have helped to establish health and safety as a trade-union issue; since it was impossible to negotiate for higher wages during that period, noneconomic issues were the only ones on which workers could seek to make gains.

On balance, industrial health and safety has been a poor relation of environmentalism. Never accorded much practical significance by the largest environmental groups, it has en-

*Ellen Shub*, Scene at Black Hills Survival Gathering, sponsored by the Black Hills Alliance as a meeting point for Native American and white environmentalists.
countered much more formidable opposition than most environmental causes. While Nixon proclaimed the 1970s "the environmental decade" and got the Environmental Protection Agency off to a genuinely firm start, his appointee as head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration seemed to have no purpose other than obstruction. The OSHA administrator told Nixon's 1972 reelection staff that "four more years of properly managed OSHA" should be used "as a sales point for fund raising and general support by employers." Even under the tough-minded Eula Bingham, head of OSHA in the Carter administration, the agency lacked real teeth for setting and enforcing industrial standards.

Still, OSHA has had at least a symbolic significance. Ronald Reagan was forced to back off from calling for its abolition in the 1980 election campaign, though he has tried to eviscerate it since taking office. He has AFL-CIO polls of union members at the time of the elections showed a striking degree of concern for occupational health and safety. Even though the bargaining position of unions has been weak over the past decade, and concrete gains have been difficult at best, workers have been part of the general rise in concern over health and fitness that has characterized American society during this period. This is something which is hard to quantify, but it seems certain that concern over workplace poisons has fed into the overall concern over environmental health. The "COSH" groups (Committee, Council, or Coalition on Occupational Safety and Health) that grew up starting in the early seventies have been part of this process. At least twenty citywide and statewide groups around the US (and others in Canada) have brought trade-union activists and a few health professionals together on issues of worksite conditions. They have coordinated lobbying against efforts to dismantle OSHA and in favor of local "right to know" ordinances requiring companies to reveal the names of hazardous substances used on their premises. Beyond that, the COSH groups have been a source of ongoing education for unionists and workers about industrial hazards. None of them has attracted massive rank-and-file participation, but even without it they have played a significant role.

Perhaps more important than the black lung strike as a symbol of working-class environmental concerns was the struggle over chemical poisoning in the Love Canal section of Niagara Falls, New York, from 1978 to 1980. The working-class homes in Love Canal had been built in the 1950s on landfill which covered an abandoned dumping ground of the Hooker Chemical Company; over time, it became clear that the unusual number of birth defects, miscarriages, and chronic illnesses suffered by the Love Canal residents could be traced to leakage from the chemical dump. Residents organized the Love Canal Homeowners Association, took their case to every level of government and to the media, and eventually won federal compensation for their relocation to new homes elsewhere.

Love Canal was not actually the first chemical scare of the 1970s. In 1974, tests showing the presence of toxic chemicals in New Orleans' water supply, together with a CBS-TV special entitled "Caution: Drinking Water May Be Hazardous to Your Health," had led to enactment of the Safe Water Drinking Act. In 1975, two of the nation's most historic rivers, the James and the Hudson, were temporarily closed for fishing when it was revealed that major corporations had been surreptitiously dumping poisonous chemicals into them; Allied Chemical had been putting the toxic insecticide kepone into the James, and General Electric had graced the Hudson with PCB's. But the
protracted agony of Love Canal gripped the country’s attention much more than the earlier episodes. Love Canal became a symbol. In its wake, people in a number of other cities and towns around the country discovered poisons in their own neighborhoods and organized around the issue. For the simple reason that dump sites were unlikely to be put in affluent neighborhoods, toxic wastes were an issue that hit a very different constituency from the one that joined the national environmentalist groups. Organizing over toxic wastes took on the embattled populist tone of people who were tired of being pushed around. And because there are tens of thousands of dump sites around the country, constituting so many time bombs loaded with unknown dangers, each local incident increased the concern of people elsewhere in the country.

The emergence of chemical poisons as a volatile political issue has helped give environmentalism much more of a populist and cross-class character than it had in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To take one sign of change, in 1969 a poll showed only 33 percent of blacks favored greater attention to the environment. In 1982, protests by Warren County, North Carolina, residents against the choice of their majority-black rural county for the state’s disposal toxic chemicals drew black leaders from throughout the South and took on the flavor of the 1960s civil rights movement. A CBS/New York Times national poll that same year on environmental issues showed even stronger support among blacks than among whites for environmental protection. By the early eighties, too, the big environmental groups were putting less emphasis on limiting population growth than in the earlier years, when Sierra Club Books had launched Paul Ehrlich’s best-selling The Population Bomb and Sierra Club members had initiated the organization Zero Population Growth. Population control in the US has always had distinctly elitist overtones, and making it a major theme of the environmentalist cause was an obstacle to developing a cross-class following. Today it is still a theme but a muted one.

A final point about the toxic-waste protests is that the leadership in them has commonly come from women. Insofar as the chemical threat is perceived as affecting people right in their homes and neighborhoods, it elicits women’s leadership in their traditional roles as protectors of family well-being. But it has a dual character: it also thrusts the most active women into public roles that challenge their traditional relegation to “private” life. It seems likely that, regardless of whether these women consider
themselves feminists, their actions are affected by the atmosphere created by the women’s movement. Just as in the early twentieth century, when women played key roles in a range of reform movements in the context of an ongoing drive for women’s rights, modern-day feminism may be having the same circumstantial effect. A women’s movement makes a big difference in what women are allowed to do in the public realm, and in what they feel capable of doing. For that reason, it is hard to imagine a movement like the toxic-waste protest taking place in a decade like the 1940s or 1950s. In this instance, the leadership asserted by women has resulted in a much stronger working-class component to environmentalism than the movement would otherwise have.

The Testing of the Movement

Any doubt that environmental protection has a mass base of support in the US has been erased by the experience of the Reagan administration. Reagan and his appointees came into office honestly believing that environmentalism had peaked, that a folksy appeal to “the people” against the “elitists” would neutralize any opposition that might emerge to the rollback of the environmental gains of the 1970s. Yet the resistance has been tenacious. Not only did the EPA become the administration’s first all-out scandal, but time and again the administration has lost when it has had to go to Congress for approval of its plans to reverse the gains of environmentalism. Generalizations about the precise locations of environmentalist sentiment are no longer safe, because the atmosphere has become so highly charged. To take a tiny example, Reagan and James Watt have attempted to arouse support in the West for their policies, attacking the “elitists” who want to lock up the region’s resources. Malcolm Wallop is a conservative Republican senator from Wyoming, a state so conservative that its governor was willing to welcome the MX missile. Faced with a reelection campaign in 1982 and reading the voters’ sentiment, Wallop cosponsored a bill to prevent Watt from allowing any oil or gas exploration in the wilderness areas of Wyoming. The Wall Street Journal reported that “Radio and television ads show Senator Wallop bravely leading the fight to protect Wyoming’s natural beauty and single-handedly trying to slow the pace of energy exploitation.” In October 1981 a poll showed that 67 percent of the sample favored keeping present environmental laws even at a cost in economic growth. Moreover, support for the laws was actually stronger among lower-income people: it was highest (70 percent) among people with annual incomes of $10-20,000 and lowest (65 percent) among people with incomes over $40,000. Expectations of a backlash against the “environmental extremists” have not come true. The administration’s only victories in this area have come through skulking administrative sabotage and underfunding. Far from arousing the public in its support, it has had to do everything possible to hide from the public. It is the environmentalists who have made the genuinely populist appeal during the Reagan years. It is a far cry from the late nineteenth century when, as historian Stephen Fox puts it, the pioneers of conservation “hated politics and doubted that the people could appreciate what they were doing.”

In looking at the resistance to Reagan’s environmental programs in class terms, it would be tempting to make a division between issues of public health and issues of nature appreciation, and say that the public-health issues are the ones that concern working-class people. But that would be too simple. The fact is that because access to the outdoors is so much great-
er for urban Americans than it was fifty years ago, nature enjoyment as a political issue is not nearly so class-based as it once was. Working-class people are much more likely to be hunters and fishers than backpackers, but the political distinction is not a sharp one. Interior Secretary Watt came into office hoping to split the environmental movement by currying favor with the “sportsmen.” As he told Field & Stream in 1981, “In a conflict between preservationists and sportsmen, we’re going to the sportsmen. We’ve sent the signals, so if there’s a wedge to be driven between the conservation community, we’ll help drive the wedge.”43 But the wedge has simple not been available. A great deal of the hue and cry over acid rain, for example, has come from people who love fishing. The National Wildlife Federation, which represents more hunting and fishing enthusiasts than any other environmental group, had no difficulty in calling for Watt’s resignation as soon as the thrust of his policies had become clear.44

The experience of the Reagan years offers a chance to see the peculiar strength of environmentalism as a social movement. In a sense, it can be said to be a historical accident: an amalgam between grass-roots public health movement and a broadened version of the traditional conservation movement. There was nothing inevitable about this convergence. It happened chiefly because there was no preexisting public health movement capable of responding to the new industrial poisons being created by American corporations. Yet, accidental or not, the convergence has been a beneficial one for both components of environmentalism. Health concerns and a concern with the frailty of the natural environment have fed on each other, have informed each other, and have lent each other an escalating urgency. Both on health issues and on issues like wilderness protection, there has been a powerful expression that has cut across class lines and that has made itself felt as a political force. In effect, environmentalism has passed the test posed by the Reagan administration. It has proved its toughness and its popular support. It is neither a passing fad nor an expression of a narrow elite segment of society. In a way that traditional conservation never was, it is a mass movement.

Footnotes
3. Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 398. This figure, like the one in footnote 26, is for national parks and national monuments only, not for all the proper-
ties of the National Park Service.


9. Ibid., p. 145.


15. Ibid., p. 347.

16. Ibid., p. 162.


19. Ibid., p. 341.

20. Ibid., p. 342.


23. Ibid., p. 84.


25. For a fuller exposition of this argument, though with somewhat different emphases, see Samuel P. Hays, "From Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States Since World War Two," *Environmental Review*, 6 (Fall 1982), 14-41.


27. Ibid., p. 398.


33. Ibid., p. 326.


35. Berman, *Death on the Job*, pp. 33-34.


42. Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy*, p. 112.


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"IT DOES AFFECT YOU:"

Women at Love Canal and Three Mile Island

Edited by Celeste Wesson

In communities across the country, women have become leaders of local environmental activism. Many are politically active for the first time in their lives in response to threats to their traditional concerns: their homes and their children. Although there has been debate among feminists about whether or not ecological issues are feminist issues, one thing is clear: women who have never been involved in the women's movement have been propelled into public life by their concern for the environment. And as surely as the lives of women were transformed by their concerns over abortion rights or job discrimination, the lives of these women have been transformed through their concern for their families and their future.

LOIS GIBBS

Lois Gibbs was president of the Love Canal Homeowners Association, which was in large part responsible for the August 1978 declaration of the health emergency there, and for the government's eventual evacuation of some families, as well as for state and federal compensation to homeowners. The following is excerpted from a presentation by Lois at the "Women and Life on Earth" conference at Amherst, Massachusetts, in March 1980.
The women of Love Canal are much like myself — housewives, mothers. Most have a high school education. We are lower-middle-class families with our biggest investment our home, and our most precious asset our children. The majority did not work but remained home tending to houses, gardens and growing children. Since the Love Canal exposure, this way of life has changed. Women are no longer at home, because it is unsafe; we’re not allowed to go near our gardens. The decisions have changed too, from normal everyday questions such as: What are we going to have for dinner? Where are we going on vacation? What color shall we paint the walls? Now the decisions are: How can we afford a new home? Will my baby have leukemia? Will my daughter ever have a normal baby? What will we do with our sick child? We can’t move and we can’t stay here.

Women prior to the Love Canal disaster were very sort of square, I guess. Women who at one time looked down on people picketing, being arrested and acting somewhat radical are now doing those very things. Now women who would never have volunteered for anything have given up two years of their lives to try to save their families, working in our office, conducting phone surveys, going from door to door.

Up until August 2, 1978, when the New York State Health Department declared an emergency, the majority of the people living around the canal did not know there were toxic wastes buried in their neighborhood. We became suspicious in June when the state began to investigate. My son had experienced health problems since he attended the 99th Street School, and I began to go from door to door trying to close the school, not realizing myself the extent of the danger. That changed quickly when I received the education of a lifetime. People were very open and willing to talk. They began to tell of health problems, crib deaths, cancer and children crippled with brain damage and deformations. Everyone signed my petition with almost no resistance, but they were still not willing to actively participate in a group form. They were waiting until the state studies were completed. The truth of the matter is they did not quite believe they were affected yet. The families had a blind faith in the government. They refused to believe the Board of Education would build an elementary school or that the city would allow them to build their homes in a dangerous area. They knew there were strong odors, black gunk and other strange substances on the canal, but did not realize the dangers they represented.

When the state held an open public meeting in August, in Albany, 500 miles away, and released their study results people became involved. At this meeting the Health Department recommended that the 99th Street School be closed, that pregnant women and children under two leave the neighborhood, that families not eat food from their home gardens and limit the time spent in their basements. The results showed air readings in some homes around the canal to be above OSHA standard and the miscarriage and birth defect rates to be above normal.

The first few days after this announcement it was mass panic. The residents were scared to death and did not know where to turn. This made my job easier. I had a familiar face because of my door-to-door campaign and now everyone wanted to be involved. I held the first Love Canal Homeowners Association meeting that same week to organize an effective pressure group to force the government and Hooker to protect our families. We had at that time over 500 people as members. We now have over 500 families — thousands of people. We had many advantages — a large number of people who felt their lives were being affected, and dedicated people, like Dr. Beverly Paigen, who were willing to work long hard hours without payment to make sure Love Canal was properly evacuated and cleaned up. These people I believe deserve a medal.

1Occupational Safety and Health Administration
2Hooker Chemical Company
In February 1979, the Health Department ordered the evacuation extended to a six-block area, but only after constant prodding and pushing by our association. Through our own health surveys, we have found the birth defect rate in the outer Love Canal neighborhood to be 56% and the miscarriage rate to be between 50 and 75%. Defects range from mental retardation to disfigurements: triple ears, double rows of teeth, extra fingers and toes. This is very frightening to a good portion of our neighborhood, which consists of young adults starting their own families. Although most women do not intend to conceive, because of the known risk, there is always the fear of accidental pregnancy. They must now wonder: “Am I going to have a normal baby? Will it live? Should I have an abortion?” Pregnancy is supposed to be a happy time.

This is just one of the problems. Many of these toxic compounds remain in the body. We have to wonder whether just moving from Love Canal will be enough to allow us to have normal babies; whether our children will be able to have normal pregnancies — my daughter, for instance. And these are just the obvious effects of the chemicals. There are many others, like diseases of the central nervous system, including nervous breakdowns, migraine headaches and epilepsy. We have not conducted a cancer survey, but we have found many women with breast or uterine cancer, and it is not just middle-aged women. A 12-year-old child had to have a hysterectomy. There are people with urinary problems, brain damage and so on. Almost every organ of the body can be affected.

Many women, especially the active ones, have been faced with another major problem — their marriages. Most of them were homemakers. Dinner was ready at five, laundry was done, and children were properly cared for. Now, in many households, dinner is not ready at five, laundry is not quite done, and the neighbor is taxiing the children around. The husbands are forced to do these things — to be satisfied with hamburgers at McDonald’s three times a week, with taking care of the children more. The husbands feel helpless because they cannot protect their families and are also jealous because their wives are now working with other men in the office. The result of all this is stress, which leads to arguments and in many cases divorce. Among families who relocated in August 1978, approximately 40% have ended in separation or divorce. There are pressures and decisions that no normal marriage is subjected to: Will we walk away from our homes and our savings to protect our children? It’s easy for you sitting in the audience to say, of course. But think about it. Think about packing the clothes in your closet and walking away to start all over again with nothing — no savings, no furniture, no money, children who are always hungry and ten thousand dollars a year.

The first thing we learned when we started organizing was how valuable the media can be. We learned what would get us national attention, like our survey on women who became pregnant during the construction of the containment system on the canal proper. During this period there was additional air contamination from open trenches. There were 15 pregnancies during this time. Of the 15, only one normal baby was born. All the rest ended in miscarriages, birth defects or diseased children.

We organized rallies and protests around times when coverage was slow throughout most of the state. We found that numbers, long chemical names and statistics confused people, so we arranged a series — a horror story of the day. One family, in their home, would tell of their problems: a mother would explain how her baby died or had three major birth defects, or a family would reveal that state officials told them not to go into their basement, their son’s bedroom or their kitchen because of chemical readings — and then the state would publicly announce there was no problem there. This was very successful and we received a large response. Readers became furious with the government for allowing this to continue.

We also found the media very helpful in pushing
the government to do what is right. In August 1979, Governor Carey was running for reelection. We held a public meeting and asked: Where is the Governor? Is he campaigning instead of taking care of the emergency situation in his state? What are his priorities? Two days later Governor Carey visited Love Canal, stood on stage in front of hundreds of people who were screaming "Murderer, help our children," with both men and women crying. Cameras rolled. The whole state watched, so he told everyone that the state would buy their homes at fair market value. Now he was a hero. He was reelected. We found that one thing government cannot stand is a confrontation of men, women and children out in the street protesting and pleading for help in front of the press.

We have also found the media a good source for getting information from the Health Department, Department of Environmental Conservation, etc. We would write a letter requesting information. If we received no answer (or a political answer, which is the same), we would give both letters to the press. If they couldn't get an answer either, the reporter would get angry and write an adverse article on the department and the person heading it.

Within our own organization we had some minor problems because of the large number of people involved, but never anything serious. One thing we found very important is communication between the office and residents. We found the more communication you have, the more people will become interested and involved, and it eliminates suspicions and gossip. We try to send out newsletters as often as possible, even if we have nothing new to say. We had block representatives for residents to call if they had a question. This was also a way to involve more people actively and give a job to someone who felt left out.

Although Love Canal may be the first, it is definitely not the only real toxic waste problem. Because we have received national media coverage, citizens call us from all over the country. Many of them tell us of wastes buried in their backyards and health problems they believe are not normal. The whole toxic waste issue affects everyone. There are thousands of known poisonous dump sites across the country and many unknown ones. These dump sites are invading our land, air and drinking water, and they must be cleaned up. Because of the cost involved to clean and monitor each site, both government and industry would like to ignore them. Meanwhile, innocent people are being hurt and profits are being made by industry.

The only way to clean up the sites properly and to avoid new Love Canals being built is for people to force the government to implement laws to stop careless disposal of toxic wastes and force industries to clean up their own dumps. We, the taxpayers, should not bear the costs of clean up while the responsible party is sitting back making a profit. The one thing you must understand is that it does affect you — you, the taxpayer; you, the consumer; or you, the victim! Unless you have thoroughly checked out your backyard and your drinking water, you are not safe. We never knew about Love Canal when we moved in eight years ago. Your children may move into an unsafe area as we did, unaware and innocent, only to suffer.

PAT SMITH

Pat Smith lives in Newberry Township, not far from Three Mile Island. She can see the nuclear plant's cooling towers from nearly every window in her house. Since March 28, 1979, when the worst accident in the history of commercial nuclear power took place there, she has become very active in the anti-nuclear movement, first in local groups demanding that Metropolitan Edison shut down the nuclear facility and now as a speaker at national and international rallies. The following is a combination of an interview and a speech she gave in April 1986 in Newark, N.J.

Exactly 12 months ago, I was a homemaker, I was a mother. I was golfing five days a week. I had the
ideal part-time job. I had the perfect life. I was always happy, bubbly. Now such a seriousness has taken over my life. God knows I'd give anything to go back to the lifestyle I had, but I can't — if I want to sleep at night. Anything is less important than closing down Three Mile Island.

We used to have a boat, and we'd always pull up right below the plant, turn the motor off and let it drift out. We'd take all our guests. "Got to show you these beautiful pyramids." You have to look straight up in the air, that's how tall they are. We just thought this was like a tourist attraction.

Wednesday, March 28 was the beginning of the drastic change in my life. I was horrified at the news of radiation releases on that day, and by the time my two daughters, 14 and 11, returned home from school, I was in tears. All my caution through the years — like not allowing my family too many dental X-rays — suddenly was undone. I was relieved when my husband agreed to take the girls north about 50 miles away that same evening.

But then on Friday the 30th, about 10:30 in the morning, I looked outside and saw a state policeman going from door to door, telling residents to stay indoors, close all windows, turn air conditioners off. He never stopped at my house because he did not see a car in my driveway. But I called a neighbor and found out what he was doing.

I was alone, as were many other homemakers. How long would I be a prisoner in my own home? Would my husband be able to return to me that day? Suddenly I was scared — real scared. And I decided
to get out of there while I could. I took the car out of
the garage, threw the suitcases in — not knowing if I
should breathe the air or not — and drove away as
quickly as I could. I didn’t dare turn the air con-
ditioner on. I thought, at least if anything dreadful
happens, I’ll be with my daughters.

There was a lot of tension at my sister’s house. We
watched the news every time it was on. Mental pa-
tients are always wringing their hands. I found my-
self doing that all the time. The least little thing
would start an argument; you could hardly have a
decent conversation. There was no conversation ex-
cept Three Mile Island. I made a vow that if I ever
returned, I would devote my full time to closing
down that nuclear plant.

I went back home close to a week afterward. My
husband, he’s a township supervisor, was invited to
speak on the capitol steps for our very first rally. My
husband and I are staunch Republicans and always
believed what the government said. The only thing I
ever did before was work at the polls twice a year. It
was something for my strait-laced husband to speak
at a rally. He was the first to declare he was anti-
nuclear. He said, everyone go home and form your
own little anti-nuclear groups and, in turn, join to-
gether. Other people were obviously thinking the
same thing, because when I returned home the
phone started ringing, with people saying, “Put me
on your list to fight Met Ed.”

Now I go all over the country knocking the NRC
and the federal government. I love America and I get
tears in my eyes when I sing “America the Beauti-
ful.” But I think we’ve let it get out of hand. I think
our government needs a good housecleaning. And
it’s got so bad I told my two kids, maybe someday
your mother will end up in jail.

I always said I could control my life, and I have. I
went away to college; I knew when I wanted to get
married. I wasn’t going to have kids for so many
years. A perfect mother’s supposed to stay home and
raise her kids, so I did that for almost 13 years. It
wasn’t the happiest time, because I thought I had a
lot to give, but my husband came from a broken
home and he wanted our daughters to know their
mother’s always there. Then I knew I was going to
get that perfect part-time job. I was going to be the
best golfer around. Suddenly I can’t control it any-
more. All I can see in the future is going out and
speaking like this.

Q.: Does that make you think differently about
yourself — speaking in public?

Very much so. I’m told that I can reach people,
perhaps emotionally. I didn’t know I had this within
me. And if that is a talent, indeed, I must use it. I was
sheltered to a point. Now I’m so happy because of
the people I’ve met. I’m so aware of so many more
thing politically.

They try to tell us we’re emotional. Yeah, I’m
emotional about the whole thing. It’s been hell living
there for 12 months. If my kids come down with leu-
kemia, I can’t say what I’m going to do. I might do
something irrational if my kids are jeopardized. All
I am is an average American homemaker. Just trying
to protect my young. Like any other animal.

Q.: How has the accident affected your daugh-
ters?

My oldest is 15. She said, “You know what I want
for my birthday, Mom? Not one word on Three Mile
Island.” And we went out to eat and, honest to God, I
couldn’t live up to it. She didn’t complain. . . .
When I spoke at our anniversary rally, she had tears
running down her cheeks the whole time. . . . She
fusses with me and says, “Oh, stop it, let’s make it
go away.” But she knows I have stood before ten
thousand people and told them I loved her. I love her
and I’m doing it for her.

Now my 12-year-old, she likes to wear T-shirts;
she doesn’t think as much about it. But she talked to
me recently about her kids. Now what’s this? A 12-
year-old talking about “the kids I’m gonna have and
what do they have to look forward to.” I don’t think
they can comprehend having a deformed child.
They just know leukemia, cancer. If they think it,
they don’t tell me. Honest to God, part of the prob-
lem is I’m so busy I don’t have time to sit down and talk to them like I should. I wonder if my kids will think some day, “Yeah, Mom was helping other people, but look how it took her away from us.” I don’t want that to happen.

Every once in a while the energy level gets pretty darn low. The other day I heard a fire siren. I was so tired, I thought, that better be just a fire. If it’s anything else, I almost don’t care. If it’s gonna be, let it be.

But I’m very strong. I have an inner strength that will never quit. They’re going to take an awful lot to wear me down. I do worry for my life. If I am such a threat, this ordinary homemaker, would they ever do something? I already said to my sister (because I don’t know how my husband is, he’s so conservative), if anything ever happens to me, don’t you stop digging into it. If there’s the slightest doubt, dig and dig and dig.

I want my kids to enjoy what you’re supposed to be able to enjoy in life, and we genuinely feel we’ve been robbed of that. And I think that’s why mothers are so involved. When you mess with mothers in any cause, they say you’re messing with fire.

I think a book should be written about people who are really involved. It’s going to sound different than

Ellen Shub, Harrisburg, 1980.
the usual writers. Because we have the feeling. We’ve experienced it. Trapped, we feel very trapped. My neighbor says we are hostages. And that’s what makes us mad at Carter. Oh, he’s so worried about the 50 hostages, but we have thousands of hostages in our area. We can’t afford to leave. It’s history in the making. I think if we reread our history books, we’d find that many other things came across about as this did.

Remember that Harrisburg trial with the priest and the nun? They specifically picked Harrisburg because it’s so complacent. If God made a nuclear accident happen, we swear he made it happen to us for a specific reason — to wake us up. I’m guilty. I’m guilty. I didn’t do anything before this. More people have to get involved. We can’t let the government jam it down our throats. That’s all I can say.

Celeste Wesson is the National Editor at National Public Radio, and was formerly the News Director at WBAI in New York. She was on the planning committee for the “Women and Life on Earth” conference in 1980. This article is revised from a version appearing in Heresies’ special issue on women and the environment in 1981.
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TOXIC TIMES AND CLASS POLITICS

Ken Geiser

In the fall of 1982, the North Carolina national guard arrested over 350 protestors, including a number of national civil rights leaders, in a quiet Warren County farm community named Afton. The arrests made front-page headlines all around the country. The form was pure direct action protest similar to the massive civil rights demonstrations of two decades earlier. But the content was different, for the Warren County protest was an incident in a growing national movement against toxic and hazardous chemical contamination.

The specific issue in Warren County was its selection by state officials as the disposal site for 32,000 cubic yards of toxic soil laden with polychlorinated biphenols, or PCBs, one of the most poisonous chemicals ever produced. PCB-contaminated oil had been illegally dumped from moving tank trucks the year before. Faced with the question of where to get rid of it, state authorities had chosen Warren County, whose per capita income is the lowest in the state and 60 percent of whose citizens are black. Organizing a protest group—the Warren County Citizens Concerned about PCB’s—the local residents began a letter-writing and media campaign aimed at forcing the governor to reconsider. The governor did back down briefly but alternative sites were deemed unacceptable or even more politically objectionable. Lawsuits also failed. With approval from the federal Environmental Protection
Agency (EPA) and $2.5 million in federal "Superfund" money, the state went ahead with the dumping. The road blockade was the last desperate effort of the Afton citizens to prevent the disposal of such a toxic chemical in their community.

While the Warren County protest failed to stop the dumping it did symbolize the character of a reborn environmental movement focused on toxic and hazardous chemical contamination. From the farmlands of Kansas to suburban Denver and inner-city Baltimore, groups of community citizens have come together in neighborhood organizations to protest the neglect and irresponsibility of local industries and the inadequacy of government authorities. Throughout the country local neighborhood people who have only read about Love Canal are finding their own lives and health jeopardized by similar conditions in their own communities.

A broad review of all the various stories suggests that something more is afoot here than simultaneous accidents. Poor handling, use, and discharge of toxic and hazardous materials turn out to be much more ubiquitous than initially expected. Throughout the country there is a growing sensitivity to toxic chemical threats, and community people are spontaneously reacting by organizing themselves wherever such threats occur. Not only is this response national, it is persistent. Once formed, these small neighborhood organizations are continuing and maturing. There are now national conferences, national newsletters, and a growing number of training institutes and resource libraries for supporting these local efforts. What there is here is more than a collection of events: it is an emerging movement—a nationwide anti-toxic-chemical movement.

This emerging new environmental movement is critical of both government and industry. It arises at a time when the traditional "mainstream" environmentalists are engaged in defensive maneuvers with an openly hostile national administration. And the new movement's class base is strikingly different. The people who make up these local protest organizations, not only in Warren County but elsewhere as well, are drawn mostly from the ranks of poor farmers and lower-income urban residents. And there is more here than simple demographics. This new movement is bringing forth an environmental consciousness among people who were unlikely to think of themselves as "environmentalists." Because the movement is so tightly rooted in the immediate experience of people's community and family life, it has an urgency and a concreteness that is incredibly compelling. For these new "environmentalists" environment is not an abstract concept polluted and decreasing in beauty or scientific value. For many it is something which has already exposed them to hazards which are debilitating them and hastening their deaths.

The Nature of the Threat

The exposure of working people to health-threatening chemicals is new only in regard to the character of the risks. Much earlier, the rise of industrialization during the mid-nineteenth century had brought a high level of risk from toxic chemicals. The early tanning industries, foundries, textile mills, and printing industries employed large quantities of acids, oils, and heavy metal compounds. Workers died of lead and arsenic poisoning and were burned and maimed by acid baths. Public health reports as early as the 1860s documented and complained of industrial chemicals polluting rivers and water supplies. But chemical hazards became qualitatively more serious with the advent of the petrochemical industries and the development of synthetic, organic chemicals following
World War II. Not occurring in nature, the complex new hydrocarbon chains have proved slow to assimilate or decompose in the natural environment or living organisms. But their versatility, ease of production, and low cost led them to be increasingly substituted for more traditional inorganic chemicals. The total production of synthetic chemicals by US firms increased from about a billion pounds in 1940 to 30 billion in 1950 and 300 billion in 1976. The variety and complexity of these chemicals also increased at an astounding rate during these years. Today it is estimated that there are nearly a quarter of a million chemicals in circulation, of which some fifty thousand are recognized by the federal government as toxic. Increasingly evidence has associated human exposure to these chemicals with birth defects, reproductive complications, respiratory problems, organ damage, and cancer.

The use of synthetic chemicals in American industry has been made possible by an enormous, though implicit, subsidy from the society as a whole. Not only has the cost of industrial disease been shifted from the companies to individual workers, but the companies have been able to evade almost entirely the costs of disposing of chemical wastes. In both cases, the externalization of costs has reduced the relative price of chemicals and thereby set an artificially low price on chemical products. Low prices and a seemingly endless variety of new chemical products were the side of the coin that capitalism liked to expose. But the coin has two sides, and the other side has become increasingly clear.

At the end of World War II US corporations produced perhaps a billion pounds of hazardous wastes per year. The figure has grown apace, to the point where the federal Environmental Protection Agency now estimates it at about 80 billion pounds a year. Of this amount, 90 percent is estimated to be disposed of improperly. Ironically, steps taken to control the problem in the 1970s had the effect of shifting it and in some ways exacerbating it. The federal Clean Air and Water Pollution acts, along with corresponding state laws, sought to reduce the dispersal of chemicals in the air and water. But because these laws did not challenge the actual generation of toxic wastes by industry, they encouraged the accumulation of large volumes of solid and liquid hazardous wastes. Much of this waste, often in highly concentrated form, was either dumped into on-site pits and lagoons or transported to off-site land disposal dumps. The federal Resource Recovery and Conservation Act was passed in 1976 to confront the problems caused by this patchwork and highly unsafe system of waste disposal. It sought to provide comprehensive "cradle to grave" regulation of toxic and hazardous wastes, but again without dealing with the initial production of the wastes in the manufacturing process. Because this new act raised the costs of managing and disposing of hazardous wastes, it created simultaneously a large new market for private waste disposal facilities and an illegal market for so-called midnight dumpers.

The unforeseen consequence of these various laws and regulations was to concentrate toxic
chemical disposal in the ground. Ground disposal appeared at first to be the most benign technique but, insidiously, it provided one of the most direct channels to human exposure. In the ground, toxic chemicals were slowly leached into ground water, the source of most of the nation’s drinking water. By the end of the decade chemical contamination suddenly emerged across the country as the primary threat to private and public water supplies. A combination of well-intended laws and a highly integrated ecological web brought millions of Americans into direct exposure with toxic chemicals in their homes.

Love Canal and the Emergence of a Movement

Despite the scope of the problem, hazardous waste was hardly heard of outside of environmental circles prior to the incident at Love Canal, which broke into national headlines in 1978. The struggle at Love Canal pitted a handful of committed neighbors against a sophisticated chemical corporation, intransigent city officials, and a less than cooperative state government. The issues involved children’s health, birth defects, miscarriages, and a multitude of adult diseases. The consequences involved the buyout and evacuation of a whole neighborhood. The national media brought reports of Love Canal into every corner of the country. The plight and struggle of Lois Gibbs and her neighbors became a national drama. Love Canal became synonymous with toxic chemicals. In the aftermath of the evacuation of residents near the Hooker Chemical site, media throughout the country turned to the discovery of hazardous waste dumpsites in local communities. With media attention came a heightened sensitivity as neighborhood residents who had once ignored old dumpsites began to speculate about the connection between physical ailments and foul-smelling sites or foul-tasting drinking water.

Passage of the “Superfund” bill of 1980, rushed through Congress in the months before Ronald Reagan took office, helped to spread the example of Love Canal. The idea of the “Superfund” was to tax the chemical industry in order to provide federal aid in cleaning up toxic dumpsites. The amount of funding finally arrived at was a totally inadequate $1.6 billion, but the law had unintended consequences. Among the compromises worked out to achieve its passage was a provision that Superfund money would be targeted toward at least some dumpsites in every state. This simple political agreement meant that the problem of hazardous wastes was immediately recognized and legitimized in every part of the nation. Passage of the law meant that the issues raised at Love Canal had become fully national in scope. Moreover, if there was ever any thought that passage of the bill would calm the political
waters and forestall the emergence of militant community protests like the one at Love Canal, that possibility was smothered by the delays and sweetheart deals that characterized the Reagan administration’s handling of the Superfund. The scandals which resulted in the EPA findings and resignations in 1983 revealed to community people throughout the country how little they could trust their government. With or without the Superfund, they would have to continue their protests and struggle if their lives were ever to be free of exposure to toxic chemicals.

In fact, Love Canal has been more or less the model for the anti-toxics movement that has arisen in the early 1980s. While targets and tactics have varied quite a bit from one area to another, the consistent theme has been local organizing around local threats. National environmental organizations have been much less important in the struggle than have ad hoc organizations of people concerned about their own communities. The new movement is emerging out of the activism of hundreds of community organizations and thousands of community leaders. Although statewide and even national coalitions are starting to be developed, it is at the local level that the movement’s wellspring of anger and commitment is more obvious.

The Grass-roots Politics of the Movement

The Matagorda County Citizens for Environmental Protection is a protest group formed in May of 1982 in Bay City, Texas. Bay City is a predominantly working-class city of some 11,000 inhabitants located along Texas’s Colorado River. Local residents work either in local petrochemical companies or in fishing grounds off the Gulf Coast. The protest grew out of the concerns of neighbors near a site designated by Waste Management, Inc. for a hazardous waste landfill. Convinced that the site was ecologically unsound for maintaining a landfill and that landfills were simply too dangerous a solution to toxic chemical treatment, the citizens protested their concerns to state and local officials. Through petitions and telegram campaigns the group brought its concerns to the governor.

Some members of the group developed rather special skills at organizing graphic demonstrations at the site and at local government offices. These included the construction of a special float in last summer’s local Rice Festival parade featuring men in gas masks picnicking alongside a smoking fifty-five-gallon drum.

As the Matagorda Citizens group developed their research skills they also expanded their range of concerns. Research into Waste Management, Inc. soon revealed that other of the company’s facilities had been cited for mishandling of wastes and that there were several suits pending against the firm. So incensed were members of the group over the company’s unwillingness to communicate effectively that the group raised funds to fly one member to Alabama to testify against Waste Management’s plans to construct a waste treatment center there. Most recently the group has developed alliances with other local community groups who are concerned about the practices of the quasi-governmental Gulf Coast Waste Disposal Authority, which operates in the Houston-Galveston area. These groups are now pushing a tightly drawn bill that would ban new hazardous waste projects within 100 miles of the Gulf of Mexico. As for Bay City, the most recent word is that Waste Management is reconsidering its option on the controversial site due to a reassessment of the potential market.

This Texas episode is illustrative of the
nationwide anti-toxics movement in several respects. First, the use of a wide range of tactics was typical of efforts elsewhere. Just as residents of Warren County, North Carolina, used letter-writing campaigns and lawsuits along with illegal sit-ins, the Matagorda County Citizens group used tactics that ranged from lobbying with the governor to demonstrations and a parade float. Another feature of the protest was that, while it started in response to a seemingly local problem, the protesters soon found a need to reach out to neighboring (and even out-of-state) communities in order to find allies and multiply their strength. Finally, the degree of support that the group obtained was striking, and is paralleled in countless other cases around the country.

The fight to clean up a hazardous waste treatment facility in Lowell, Massachusetts, presents a similar case. Lowell is the historical archetype of a working-class community, with a history of textile mills dating back a century and a half. The Ayer City neighborhood lies on the outskirts of town along the Merrimack River. It was here that the Silresim Chemical Corporation operated a hazardous waste treatment facility from 1971 until 1977, when it filed for bankruptcy. The state was left with responsibility for 21,000 rusting drums of hazardous waste on the site. While the state worked to clear the site, local neighbors learned that toxic chemicals had also leaked into the soil and water table. Through the local chapter of Massachusetts Fair Share, a statewide citizen action organization, the Ayer City community began to press for cleanup of the ground as well.

Fair Share staff members helped the residents to organize a neighborhood health survey, which revealed a surprising 50 percent miscarriage rate. Local officials were generally uncooperative and the state moved relatively slowly to address the underground contaminants. Seeing this, the citizens began to demand not only cleanup but a comprehensive health survey and a temporary evacuation while ground cleanup operations were conducted. Having identified a local bank as potentially culpable in the worst dumping, the citizens picketed the bank president’s house and demanded cleanup compensation. Seizing on the governor’s election campaign the residents organized a major neighborhood meeting with the governor where toxic chemical protest groups from around the state united in presenting their demands.

State officials responded to this pressure by contracting for a full health survey of the neighborhood and applying to the federal government for Superfund designation of the Silresim
site. The Superfund designation only shifted the focus of the Ayer City residents, and in February the group staged a surprise sit-in at the regional Environmental Protection Agency office. The issue remains stalled at the moment until the results of the health survey are released and a decision is made on the evacuation.

The protest at Lowell employed direct confrontation and civil disobedience tactics. The role of Massachusetts Fair Share was significant not only in providing technical assistance and organizer support, but also in linking the Ayer City neighbors to residents of other communities where toxic chemicals were a health hazard. The unity of groups proved a much more effective political force than possible with a single organization.

The fight in Lowell over the Silresim dumpsite involved an issue similar to the one at Love Canal: leakage from an abandoned disposal site. Perhaps this is the kind of circumstance that is most often associated with the antitoxics movement. It might be easy to conclude that the problem is simply a lag in disposal techniques: that the sites causing the problems are the ones that were built before companies had enough knowledge of how to handle toxic wastes. But this conclusion would be very misleading. The Matagorda County, Texas, struggle described above is an example of people having to organize to defend themselves against a poorly conceived new dumpsite. There have been many such struggles around the country. And a great many other protest movements have arisen against facilities that are currently in operation. Neighborhood concern arises when poor construction or poor management allows leaks, discharges, or even fires and explosions. Perhaps the most spectacular was a night-long conflagration at an Elizabeth, New Jersey, chemical waste facility that sent thousands of gallons of toxic chemicals into the air breathed by residents of nearby neighborhoods. Thus, it needs to be emphasized that the antitoxics movement is not directed simply at the residues of improper dumping practices that are now behind us. The problems are ongoing, and they are continuing to generate new local insurgencies.

The pattern of these local protest movements is different from what can be called "mainstream" environmentalism, defined by the large national organizations. Even as the movement had mushroomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, its predominantly middle-class composition had remained apparent. Small attention was paid to the specific environmental issues of inner-city neighborhoods ("urban
problems”) or workplaces (“labor problems”). These issues were given nothing more than lip service, and usually not even that. Even in relation to the maintenance of outdoor recreational resources, there was often an element of implicit class conflict. Working-class interest in the outdoors was seen by many upper-middle-class environmentalists as consisting of trailer caravans, dirt bikes, speedboats, and wildlife hunting, and considered an embarrassment. Even as environmental issues were highly popular among all classes of society, there were real obstacles to cross-class participation in environmentalism as an organized movement.

At the same time, the legislative victories won by environmentalism, as they became embodied in well-funded federal and state bureaucracies, carried with them the danger of a diminution in popular participation. By the middle of the 1970s many thousands of public officials, many of them drawn from the ranks of environmentalist groups, were employed in researching and regulating environmental problems. Almost inevitably there was a cooling down in the rhetoric and militancy of environmental advocacy, a tendency for environmentalism to be seen as a technical problem that could be solved with the right adjustment of competing interests.

In contrast, the new anti-toxics movement has grown up very largely among “outsiders” in society: working-class and other lower-income people who would feel out of place at a meeting of a typical chapter of, say, the Audubon Society or the Sierra Club. And the new movement has had an urgency and immediacy that has little patience for the slow workings of governmental bureaucracies. Casting environmental issues in terms of personal health has proved to be a powerful stimulus to social action, especially when the health hazards are identifiable and close at hand.

**Workplace and Community**

In urban areas, community-based protests have often been a surrogate for struggles at the workplace. That is, the hazards that are opposed are sometimes a threat first and foremost to the workers at the plant which is producing the toxics in the first place. Yet it is in the community that the struggle has taken place. It is important to understand why this is so, and to see the significance of city- and statewide “right to know” laws in that context.

The most obvious reason for the community focus is that workers in a plant are inhibited from speaking out against working conditions. It is not just a matter of individuals being subject to company harassment, but there is the constant threat that if the company is forced to make costly repairs it will “have to” close the plant. This form of corporate blackmail has often proved effective, not only against union demands but against environmental regulations as well.

Added to the threat of job loss, lack of political resources makes it hard to organize around health and safety protections in the context of a single plant. The help that should be readily available from the federal government, in the
form of tough national standards that were supposed to be established and enforced by the Labor Department under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, has rarely been available. It is also hard for most unions to give help in this area. Not only are major unions on the defensive right now, but there is often a built-in cynicism among workers as to how much unions can really change the conditions of work. The feeling often is that the workplace cannot really be changed—that the only recourse is to struggle for higher wages as a compensation for accepting hazards.

A final weakness in workplace-based organizing around hazards is that, especially among male workers, there is a tendency to deny the risks. In part it is fatalism in the face of economic dependency, in part it is sometimes a kind of machismo that is totally inappropriate when applied to the kind of dangers posed by microscopic chemical particles.

In contrast, when a hazard is found to be threatening a neighborhood or town, a different dynamic is set in motion. Concerns about family health and the health of future babies come immediately to the forefront. The leadership of women, often difficult in workplace situations, is a natural occurrence in a neighborhood setting. Women are often the first to take action around suspicions of health risks, and the least ready to accept the assurances of company or governmental officials that everything is under control.

Lois Gibbs’s special role as the most visible activist in the Love Canal neighborhood (and her more recent emergence as a national figure in supporting local grass-roots organizing) reveals a common pattern. Many women, like Ms. Gibbs, have had little political experience before they suddenly find themselves involved in organizing their neighborhood around highly emotional issues. Their concern about their family’s health is typically the primary motivator, but it soon develops to anger and outrage as they find how little effectiveness they have in gaining quick and serious government response to their concerns. Freedom from the threat of job loss permits community residents to more quickly identify corporate culpability and more directly demand remediation and compensation. This freedom plus the predominance of women often leads corporate managers and government officials to view these new environmentalists as irrational and hysterical. Instead, the protest leaders tend to be quite hardheaded, highly focused, and persistent. The strength of their demands lies in the immediateness with which they feel that their lives are jeopardized by distant corporate managers who are more interested in profits than public health.

Thus, a community focus has often made possible a much stronger response to chemical hazards than would be possible in a strictly workplace setting. Some of the most farsighted leaders of the new movement, however, recognize the need to try to bring community and workplace together. In this regard, the push for “right to know” laws, requiring companies to disclose the toxic chemicals they are using both to their own workers and to community groups, is an important development. Not only do such laws hold the potential for workers and local
residents to strengthen protections against chemical hazards, but the type of coalition that is developed in campaigning for the laws may strengthen the working-class composition of the anti-toxics movement.

The Delaware Valley Toxics Coalition was formed in 1979 in Philadelphia to coordinate neighborhood, health, environmental, and labor groups in advocating a worker and community right-to-know ordinance. That ordinance, which passed the city council in 1981 as the first in the nation, provided both community residents and workers with access to information about the toxic chemicals they are exposed to. Prior to 1981 such right-to-know campaigns had been labor-advocated and limited to providing workers alone with such information. Following the Philadelphia victory, efforts to achieve right-to-know legislation in other cities and states have followed the more comprehensive conception and involved broad-based community and labor alliance. In some cases, firefighters have played a key role, exploiting both the prestige attached to their jobs and their ties to local labor federations. In California, for example, unionized firefighters have been instrumental in the efforts of the newly formed Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition to have a model right-to-know ordinance passed by local governments in the San Jose area.

The fight for a statewide right-to-know law
in Massachusetts, whose outcome is not yet clear, illustrates the interplay between workplace and community that is often involved. The campaign has been sponsored by the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, but from the start it has been shaped and supported by a coalition in which community-based groups have had a strong input. Some thirty organizations are in the coalition altogether. The bill was drafted carefully so that both union representatives and other qualified people designated by workers in a plant must be given access to company records having to do with the use of toxic chemicals. Community residents can get this same access by examining records sent by companies to local government offices.

The Massachusetts bill, despite overwhelming approval in the state senate, has been attacked fiercely by business groups, who have made it their number one political priority in state politics at the time being. Recognizing that a bill is likely to be passed in some form, they have tried to split the bill’s supporters. But the coalition has stood firm in defending all provisions of the bill. Both union leaders and others in the coalition recognize the unique power of a coalition, and they are not about to give that power up. Regardless of the final fate of the Massachusetts bill, the support it has gathered shows the way in which workplace and community rights can be joined together.

**Future of the Movement**

The consequences of hazardous and toxic chemical use and misuse will not be easily or quickly resolved. The proliferation of local community groups and the development of coalitions adds up to an emerging movement precisely because there will be no speedy or simple solutions. The conditions for the emergence of a movement are already set. Yet the effectiveness of such a movement remains questionable. There are formidable tasks ahead and some serious debates on programs and strategy.

Conceivably, the movement could be bought off by massive infusions of federal revenue for dumpsite cleanup and the development of safe treatment facilities. This is unlikely. The cleanup of these sites is both technologically difficult and highly costly. Estimates range from several million to hundreds of millions of dollars per site.

The movement could also be diverted by the attempts of governmental agencies to tie up the toxics issue in long bureaucratic processes and professional debates. There is a danger that the fervor of local organizing can be dissipated by an elaborate structure of “proper channels.” To some extent, there is a possibility that the involvement of mainstream environmental groups can add to the problem, since they are often at home with scientific studies and with governmental labyrinths. Still, in a number of cases, the militancy and unorthodox tactics of local anti-toxics groups have forced governmental officials to cut through the red tape. Lawsuits and lobbying have been used as part of a range of tactics, and the immediacy of the movement has been preserved rather than lost.

A third danger is that the movement could succumb to excessive localism. “Put it anywhere but not in my backyard” could be a natural implicit theme of local protests. It is not inconceivable that an anti-toxic group in one town could support a state’s effort to force an unwanted dumpsite onto another community in another corner of the state. To some extent, this danger has been counteracted in practice by the regional coalitions that have sprung up in the anti-toxics movement. More basically, however, there needs to be an expansion of current efforts to reduce the production of toxics in the first place. “Source reduction” is not
new or untried: a few companies like the 3M Corporation have even used it systematically and found that it saves them money. But it has to be imposed on all firms by tough regulations, preferably at the national level. Estimates of the potential effects of source reduction range as high as an eighty percent alleviation of the flow of toxic wastes.

The central task in advancing the movement, however, must be broadening its base and strengthening its linkages with other parallel movements, in particular labor and public health. The opportunity to effectively link community, health, and workplace organizing around environmental issues must not be underestimated. It is not often that community and workplace issues are so obviously linked. Occupational health and safety, cancer and a multitude of environmentally dependent diseases are easily recognized by outraged community groups as similar issues. Where many of the local community organizations are from working-class neighborhoods the ties to workplace and labor groups are sources of support and resources. The occupational health sections within the labor movement and the various COSH (Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health) groups are important allies. But the linkages must be broadened to the labor movement as a whole. Building unity between labor and community around environment and health issues serves to propel both movements. The power of the labor movement legitimizes and grounds community health issues, and community health struggles broaden the focus of labor advocacy toward addressing the full quality of life of working people. Issues of occupational disease and job development or reproductive hazards at work and family well-being at home can be raised as singular concerns. Such labor and community unity can link employment rights with civic rights and open opportunities for advancing democracy in both workplaces and neighborhoods.

Working together around the right-to-know, tightened toxic regulations, reducing toxins at the workplace, or liability issues permits community and worker organizations to build long-term campaigns. Well they should. The toxic chemical problem will not be easily or readily resolved. Major changes are required in how industry produces products. The goal of these changes must be to fully wean industry of its reliance on chemicals that risk the health and lives of workers and community residents. Those changes will require a toughened struggles, for at the very heart of the changes are questions about who makes decisions about what products are produced and how. The rights of management, the rights of working people, and the rights of community residents must be reexamined, in a way that goes to the very core of our economic system.

Footnote

1. There is promise, too, in a national coalition that is taking shape this summer to push for federal legislation. It is being initiated by Citizen Action, coordinating umbrella for a number of statewide citizen action organizations, and the activist Clean Water Action Project in Washington.

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Asbestos

Floating like
snowflakes it
flutters
and sways as it
clings to your clothes and your hair and
it tinges
it tickles
it swells up your throat
until every breath becomes itchy and tight.

Like a sweater you swallowed
it rubs up inside you and nudges and
scraps against tracheal tissue.

It slips
through the bronchi and into
your lungs
where it burrows and giggles and scratches
and tugs until—who
would suspect
that those drifting white
featherflakes floating through
schools and through hospitals, factories—
hairdryers!—who would suspect them?

and why weren’t we told
way back in the thirties
of the cancerous findings that
never were published, but financed and
buried by the burgeoning industry—
cancerous findings! conclusively proven
back in the thirties—

and now so much later,
still we’re installing
asbestos asbestos you die so much later,
20 years later you die from those snow-
feather particles

drifting throughout the city:
protecting the wires, protecting the ducts,
protecting the products

packaged
to kill you.

Susan Eisenberg
Hanging In, Solo
(So What's It Like to Be the Only Female on the Job?)

On the sunshine rainbow days
womanhood
clothes me in a fuchsia velour jumpsuit
and crowns me with a diamond hardhat.
I flare my peacock feathers
and fly through the day's work.

Trombones sizzle
as my drill glides through cement walls
through steel beams.
Bundles of pipe rise through the air
at the tilt
of my thumb.
Everything I do
is perfect.

The female of the species
advances 10 spaces and
takes an extra turn.

On the mudcold-gray-no-
sun-in-a-week days womanhood
weighs me down in colorless arctic fatigues;
hands me an empty survival kit;
and binds my head in an iron hardhat
three sizes too small.
I burrow myself mole-like into my work, but
my tampax leaks;
my diamond-tip bit burns out after one hole;
my offsets are backwards;
all of my measurements are wrong.
At each mistake, a shrill siren
alerts all tradesmen on the job
to come laugh at me.
Everything I do
must be redone.
The female of the species
loses her next turn
and picks a penalty card.

On most days, those
partly sunny days that bridge the
rainbow sunshine days and the modcold-
gray days
womanhood outfits me in a
flannel shirt and jeans
and hands me a hardhat just like
everyone else’s. I go about my work like
a giraffe foraging the high branches:
stretching myself comfortably.
As I hang lighting fixtures and make splices,
I sing to myself
and tell myself stories.
Everything I do
is competent enough.

The female of the species
advances 1 space
and awaits her next turn.

Susan Eisenberg

(for Margaret)

Margaret Gove (1944-1983) Margaret was one of the first five women to complete apprenticeship in Boston Local 103 (IBEW). She was a master electrician, active in the anti-nuclear movement and women’s community.
Rockwell Kent, Europe, 1946.
Since I cannot presume that the events at Seveso are generally known, I will briefly review them. On July 10, 1976, an explosion at the Icmesa factory in Meda (a small town near Seveso, Lombardy) released a cloud of poisonous gas over the town of Seveso. Some days after the accident the multinational Givaudan-La Roche, owner of the Icmesa factory, communicated to the Italian local authorities that the gas released by the explosion contained a highly poisonous chemical, dioxin, of which the pathogenic effects on animals and humans, even at very low levels of exposure, were already known from previous industrial accidents. Dioxin was also held responsible for genetic alterations both in animals and people. The population of Seveso had been exposed to it for days without any caution. When the first evacuation measures were taken, a few weeks had already elapsed since the disaster.

Comments within the Left on events in Seveso have generally focused on the causal relation between capitalism and industrial pollution. The episode has been taken as a further instance—as it certainly is—of the link between capitalism and ruthless exploitation of people and environment. It is easy—and right—to lay the responsibility for Seveso’s catastrophe at the door of the multinational Givaudan-La Roche. What is less easy, even from a leftist viewpoint, is to assess the responsibility of science in the case. It has often been said, for

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example, that if La Roche had paid due attention to the scientific reports on dioxin’s effects, as observed in previous industrial accidents, that is, if scientific knowledge was not subjected to the distorting influence of capitalist interests, then the catastrophe, or at least some of its worst consequences, would have been avoided. As far as this is a typical statement, the case of Seveso does not seem to have shaken the common belief in science as a body of true statements, unbiased by social interests and therefore entirely reliable. Comments in the Italian Left on Seveso, particularly those from within the Communist Party, have consistently combined a strong emphasis on capitalist responsibility for the disaster with a view of science as the only reliable cognitive basis of effective protection from pollution. Contrasted with the corrupting influence of capitalism, science still keeps, even in the eyes of some people on the Left, a halo of purity; it is seen as the only thoroughly clean element in a polluted world.

Taken against this background, Laura Conti’s book* is refreshing. The book gives a detailed account of the first year at Seveso after the accident of July 1976. It relates how, month after month, the public authorities and the community reacted to the disaster. As a medical doctor and a representative for the Communist Party in the regional government of Lombardy, the author has had a first-hand experience of the events and she relates them in the unpretentious and frank style of a work journal, without the faintest shade of official tone. The merit of the book lies principally in the quality of the information it gives about the role of science in the management of an industrial, ecological catastrophe. The book has no theoretical ambitions; it does not debate in general terms the relations between science, capitalism, and industrial pollution. When theorizing, the author very often resorts, more or less naively, to the model of the capitalist “abuse” of science. But in spite of this theoretical allegiance, the book is full of observations about the role and responsibility of science itself in the mismanagement of the Seveso disaster, observations which—as I will try to show—directly contradict the “abuse” model.

This is not due to the author’s empiricist adherence to the facts but to the autobiographical viewpoint from which she chooses to tell the story. Laura Conti writes from the starting point of her own experience. She frankly describes her bewilderment when confronted with contradictory scientific reports, her feeling of helplessness in the presence of a danger that science cannot assess with reasonable certainty, her frustration and anger at safety measures taken in the name of science but devoid of practical meaning. The dramatic significance these events have had in her life, shaking her trust in her double role as scientific and political officer, makes her able to observe and relate episodes which cannot be referred to an “abused” science but to a science fully responsible for the social processes it enacts. Her commitment to understand and communicate her own experience, expressed by her biographical approach, is stronger than her allegiance to the “abuse” model of science. From the viewpoint of a criticism of this model, therefore, I found her book rich in useful suggestions and ideas, which I shall try to discuss in this review.

The book is also intriguing and moving. Together with her own experience, Laura Conti relates, with great emotional and intellectual involvement, the experience of the people of Seveso, the story of a disrupted community. We learn how the people of Seveso have tried to adapt to the new situation created by the catastrophe, trying to survive as a community rather

*Seen from Seveso: An Extraordinary Event and the Ordinary Administration, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977.
than as scattered exiles. We are offered a penetrating account of the way these people have reacted to the scientific definitions of pollution, danger, and risk and to the safety measures taken by the authorities; how they have accepted or rejected these definitions and measures according to their compatibility with their own effort to keep some form of communal identity. We learn that the people of Seveso have both experienced the scientific definitions of danger as unquestionable and skeptical rejected them as meaningless. The book, therefore, gives very interesting evidence on the general question of the hold that scientific ideas can have on people in a dramatic environmental crisis. It can fruitfully be read as an anthropological description of a community facing the conflicts and tensions between scientific and popular attitudes towards industrial pollution.

The first months after the catastrophe, according to the narrative of Laura Conti, were months of general bewilderment. Gathering information was extremely haphazard and arbitrary, even for public authorities. The scientific reports contradicted one another and were by no means clear. The reports issued by the local government did not state their scientific sources—an attempt, Laura Conti suggests, to avoid mentioning their chief source of information, namely, the La Roche laboratories. For months no official statement on the nature of the chemicals issued in the Icmesa’s explosion was published; when, at the end of July, a report was finally issued by the Lombardy authorities, it defined dioxin as “a heretofore unknown gas.” At a session of the Lombardy Regional Council, Laura Conti was given, by responsible officers, oral information about the level of dioxin in the polluted area. She found that the information did not correspond to the data contained in the official written report and she asked for clarification. She was told that the oral information was correct but no one bothered to rectify the error in the written report.

While confusion and inaccuracy spread, great emphasis was being laid on the objective scientific criteria used to define and delimit the polluted area. Seveso was soon divided into three zones according to the degree of dioxin found in the soil, in objects, and in vegetation: a Zone A, where the dioxin level was higher than the amount declared “acceptable”; a Zone B, with a degree of dioxin pollution lower than this amount, and a Buffer Zone, where dioxin could not be detected with the available scientific instruments. The map of pollution was apparently based on the most objective of procedures, scientific measurement.

Safety measures in relation to the population were taken accordingly: Zone A was completely evacuated; Zone B was subjected to “precautionary measures,” including suspension of work in factories and shops (but not in houses) and removal of children and pregnant women during the day (they were allowed to return to their homes for the night). In addition, all the people of Seveso were strongly recommended to take scrupulous care in their personal hygiene.

So people kept washing themselves and housewives went about their daily work, cleaning and dusting somewhat more carefully than usual. However, both the map of pollution and the safety measures were based upon a lie: no amount of dioxin can be scientifically declared “safe.” In fact, the map, the safety threshold, and the evacuation had chiefly a political and psychological meaning. Laura Conti writes:

While science said that with dioxin there can be no safety threshold and that therefore a complete evacuation of the whole area was the only adequate measure, more complex reasons, both political and
psychological, suggested that somehow a threshold, any threshold, had to be fixed. As local governmental authorities we had to choose between the pathogenic effects of dioxin and the pathogenic effects of evacuation. A mass exodus would have been experienced by the people not as protection but as persecution. Since there is neither a way to detect the presence of dioxin the human body nor a way to measure the level of exposure to dioxin in people, and since the pathogenic effects of dioxin are nonspecific, we could not announce a new disease, we could only forecast an increase in mortality, too abstract to be perceived by the people as a concrete danger, worth fleeing from. We could only say that “one day” (and we did not now when) “somebody” (and we did not know who) would have fallen sick (and we did not know what). For the people it was as if we knew nothing at all.

She is describing here her frustration as a scientific officer (a medical doctor) confronted with uncertainty and impotency, and forced to resort to a compromise between her scientific conscience and her political role. In her frank admission of the entanglement of scientific and political motives in the administrative management of the catastrophe, she gives an important clue to an understanding of the people’s reactions. These reactions are the most important and strange aspect of the Seveso episode: the people refused to believe in the danger, or rather oscillated between anxious requests for scientific information and reassurance on one side and utter skepticism, accompanied by hostility to, and noncompliance with, the safety measures, on the other.

According to Laura Conti’s report, skepticism and indiscipline developed gradually as a reaction to the mismanagement of the situation. At first, people asked anxiously for scientific information. They wanted to be “tested.” They wanted to know the exact figures of dioxin level in their town, in their houses, in their own bodies. They wanted to know the probable incidence and the nature of the diseases and of the genetic alterations foreseen as a consequence of their exposure to dioxin. When they realized that the official reports were contradictory and unreliable, they autonomously wrote to international institutions asking for scientific information.
But a discrepancy arose very soon between popular and scientific criteria in the delimitation of danger. The scientific and official criteria were, as seen before, the measurement of dioxin level and the determination of a politically motivated "safety threshold." But the presence of danger was also testified to by evidence apparent in everyone's experience, such as the death of domestic animals, and this evidence did not confirm the official map of pollution. Animals went on dying in Zone B, officially declared sufficiently "safe." The spatial distribution of an epidemic of chloracne (a skin disease due to exposure to dioxin and especially affecting children) did not correspond at all to the distribution of dioxin as indicated in the map.

In fact, Laura Conti suggests, the emphasis laid upon the scientific measurement of dioxin level led to an underestimation of the value of more empirical methods of assessing pollution and to a disregard for the popular experience of danger. Popular initiatives in the decontamination effort were also systematically discouraged. Popular proposals to limit the spreading of pollution were slighted. There was a suggestion, for example, to divert a river before the rainy season, in order to prevent the spreading of dioxin through water, but the proposal was not even considered by the relevant authorities.

Furthermore, according to Laura Conti, the scientists' hope to find a way to test exposure to dioxin in humans actually delayed the implementation of sanitary measures. The anticipation of a scientifically accurate method of detection and measurement of dioxin was detrimental to prompt and effective measures. A fetishistic attitude to scientific measurement was also shared by the local authorities. Months after the drawing of the first map of pollution, new measurements proved that the original map and the three-zones partition were completely untenable, because the distribution of pollution was different and the polluted area far larger than had been thought at first. The new results were kept secret for months. The reason the authorities gave for this delay was that, given the "unexpected" character of the new results, they had thought it necessary to repeat the measurements with new samplings, in order to check their correctness. But no new safety measures in relation to the population
were thought "necessary" in the meantime. Measures affecting the health of about thirty thousand people were thus postponed until satisfactory scientific data could be collected. Precaution and common sense had to give way to the cult of scientific certainty.

Examples from Laura Conti's report of a fetishism of scientific measurement among the Seveso authorities could easily be multiplied. This fetishism dramatically contrasted with the popular attitude, which was one of growing incredulity regarding scientific findings in general. Misled and frustrated in their attempt to grasp the real scope of the danger, the people of Seveso finally started to question the existence of dioxin itself. Confronted with contradictory and unintelligible scientific information, they started to view dioxin as "a big con trick."

This skepticism found overt and covert manifestations. In October the people evacuated from Zone A reoccupied their homes in a symbolic demonstration which was to be repeated many times, in defiance of the law and of dioxin. They claimed, and, according to Laura Conti, with some justification, that the dioxin level in Zone A was lower than that of the motorway, which had not been closed to traffic. If cars were allowed there, they argued, they ought to be allowed to return to their homes. In fact, the new measurements of dioxin level showed that part of Zone A was "negative," that is, no dioxin could be detected there with the available instruments. This did not mean, of course, that the place was safe. But "since a great significance had been attributed to measurements and thresholds, people attached great importance to them; not having understood that with dioxin there is no safety threshold, whenever they saw a negative area on the map of pollution, which included their houses, they demanded immediately to be allowed to return there."

Covert breakings of the safety rules multiplied. The fence enclosing Zone A was systematically pulled down at night, replaced during the day by the local authorities, only to be pulled down again the following night. Disregard for the safety rules was openly displayed. The people mocked the decontamination workers, who used heavy masks and protections to do the same work that the local women had been doing for months with bare
hands and arms. During the night people got into the prohibited Zone to remove property left behind. The responsibility for this can be partly attributed to the local authorities themselves: immediately after the evacuation and enclosure of Zone A, they had allowed "heads of family" to go back to their houses during the day, under military escort, to take away "personal possessions," provided that they had been stored in drawers and wardrobes. In Zone B, work went on in shops and houses in spite of the prohibition. Most of the safety norms were neglected by the population.

While new alarming reports on the spreading of pollution were published, the relationship between the people of Seveso and the regional authorities got more and more strained. The people of Seveso held the regional authorities responsible for the spreading of dioxin because of their inability to start a serious decontamination program. They also accused them of using Seveso as a storing place for polluted material from other areas. In turn, the regional authorities, alarmed by the spread of dioxin, sent the army to Seveso to enforce observance of the safety rules. This was tantamount to saying that the people of Seveso were responsible for the spreading of dioxin and had to be treated accordingly, like criminals.

The community reacted wildly and angrily. Episodes occurred which Laura Conti defines as vendeen, a term taken from the White Terror in the French Revolution and generally denoting popular counter-revolution and obscurantism. Television operators were violently expelled from Seveso by an angry crowd. The Seveso Council decided not to celebrate the 25th of April, anniversary of Italy's liberation from fascism, the most popular of national festivities. "It was a way to express symbolically their separation from the national community," Laura Conti comments. "Seveso withdrew to an angry aloofness, with a feeling of persecution in which every stranger appeared as an enemy."

This reaction can be understood, she suggests, only if we consider that we are dealing with a humiliated community, which desperately clings to its internal solidarity because no support seems to come from the outside. The people of Seveso felt that they had been persecuted rather than helped: had not Seveso been
treated like a litter box, the storage place of polluted material from the surrounding area? Had not Seveso been occupied by the army as a foreign country? Had they not, the victims of pollution, been treated like polluters like criminals?

In this context Laura Conti tries to understand the reluctance of most people at Seveso to adopt abortion as a precaution against possible fetus malformation due to dioxin. This attitude, she argues, should not simply be attributed to Catholic beliefs; it can be rightly understood within the complex psychological process of adaptation to the new reality after the disaster. The people of Seveso were trying to adapt to the new reality of their town by accepting pollution as a new permanent feature of their life. Pollution, attached to Seveso, as a stigma, had become, in a way, part of the community’s self-definition. To accept a malformed baby meant symbolically to accept the consequences of pollution, and therefore to accept the new reality of Seveso itself. It involved an appeal to internal solidarity, well suited to the needs of a community that so badly resented the lack of support from the outside. The Catholic ideas on abortion, implying the malformed fetus’s right to life as a human being in its own right, met this deep psychological need to accept the consequences of pollution.

As a politician, Laura Conti is aware that here lies one of the reasons why the Catholic appeal at Seveso found better reception than that of the Communist Party. The Communist strategy at Seveso was based on a call to popular mobilization in the effort to decontaminate the environment. “Cleaning up” was the Communist formula at Seveso, a formula that, as Laura Conti explains, had a wider political meaning: “cleaning up, sweeping away dioxin, meant sweeping away many other things, the corruption, inefficiency, and inadequacy of the Christian Democrat regime.” The people of Seveso had lost their previous identity, based on work and the accumulation of consumer goods. As a substitute for that, the Communists offered them the identity of a community engaged in the collective effort to clean up their world.

This appeal found very little support among the people of Seveso, as their vendéen attitudes showed. Laura Conti tries to explain this fact through the class composition of Seveso society. The economic structure of the town, she argues, was still predominantly precapitalist; most workers were small craftsmen or wage earners in small factories. If the majority of the Seveso working class had been modern and organized, the vendéen attitudes would not have prevailed and the Communist appeal to a literal and political “cleaning up” would have found a better hearing.

I do not find this analysis convincing. Besides the perplexity that inevitably arises when one reads that the seat of a factory owned by a multinational is still “precapitalist,” I think that her idea of the working class is an abstract stereotype. She contrasts an abstract craftsmen community, seen as individualistic, competitive, incapable of discipline and of collective effort, with an abstract working class, seen as a compact, disciplined, organic community. I cannot discuss here the implications of this mythical image of a “modern working class,” safeguard of discipline and order in a technological society. I think it exists only in the Communist Party’s ideology and it is, in my view, one of its most dangerously conservative aspects.

This stereotype distorts her understanding of the political meaning of the popular behavior. The people of Seveso, she argues, were unable to individuate their enemy correctly; their hostility to the public authorities, as a matter of
fact, was stronger than against the polluter itself, the multinational Givaudan-La Roche. In this fact she sees another instance of the insufficient development of class consciousness at Seveso, again attributing it to a "precapitalist" economic structure.

Still, this reaction seems to me less "precapitalist" and irrational than she implies. The people directed their pressure against the public authorities because it would obviously have been less effective to channel it directly against Givaudan-La Roche. They knew that only the state could cope with La Roche and they also knew that the state had left them in the power of the multinational, without any guarantee against exploitation and danger, because of the structural complicity of public powers and private industrial interests. Far from betraying in this a "precapitalist" political consciousness, the people of Seveso had a correct vision of the structure of power in a highly industrialized society, as founded upon a permanent link between state and private industry.

The Communist Party’s strategy is based upon a systematic denial of the link between state and private capitalism; it tends to oppose "good" public institutions to "bad" capitalist structures. It is understandable, therefore, that the Communist policy at Seveso was in support of the regional authorities and that the Communists viewed the popular hostility to these authorities as reactionary: Vendée. As a member of the Communist Party, Laura Conti shares this view—hence her inability to understand the political meaning of the vendéen reactions, in spite of her sympathetic attitude towards the people of Seveso.

She fails to see that the people’s apparently "irrational" behavior was in fact a reaction to the irrationality of the institution. Although her description often points to this irrationality, she fails to conceptualize it. It is as if, in spite of what she witnessed herself, she could not help but believe in a core of untainted rationality represented by the public institutions, the state, and, most of all, by science. She takes the fact that at Seveso a fetishistic attitude to scientific measurement hindered and delayed effective precautionary measures as a sign that Italian science had been damaged by inefficient government. It is the Christian Democrat regime, she argues, that has undermined the quality of Italian science and that hinders the "cleaning up," not just of Seveso, but of the whole of Italy. There is, of course, some truth in this, but I want to point out that, in holding a political mismanagement of science as responsible for the episodes she observes, she is protecting science itself from criticism. Relating the discrepancy between the distribution of skin disease and the official map of dioxin level, for example, she writes that the inaccuracy of the map was not a refutation of the scientific knowledge of dioxin. Of course, it was not. Still we ought to consider that the fetishism of measurement and objectivity, the significance attributed to quantitative thresholds, the disregard for popular experience and common sense are all intrinsic aspects of scientific mentality, not only in Italy and not only under a Christian Democrat regime.

Laura Conti’s attitude betrays a view of science as a body of true statements and not as a practice. In this view, the disregard for common experience and the consequent loss of information that the practice of science sometimes involves are obliterated as insignificant; what matters is only the final result: true and useful knowledge of nature. Still, the practical price of this knowledge ought always to be put on the account of scientific practice. The intellectual consequences of scientism have often been pointed out and criticized, but Seveso gives us occasion to reflect upon its practical
consequences. The fetishism of scientific measurement has led, in this case, to a disregard for other possible criteria for individuating dangers, especially those arising from common experience, and the pursuit of a scientifically adequate assessment of the level of pollution has delayed precautionary measures. It seems to me that the blame for this cannot be laid upon a misused science but upon science itself, upon its intrinsic structure of relevances, upon its hierarchy of values, according to which objective and quantitative data matter more than what people experience. This may work very well for certain purposes but it may have negative effects in other cases. Seveso seems to be one such case: instead of speeding up and facilitating the protection of people from danger, the emphasis on scientific measurement and certainty has actually hindered and delayed it.

The popular vendéen reaction to the scientific-administrative handling of pollution, described by Laura Conti, should be put within this context. This suggests caution before labelling it as vendéen. Popular hostility to scientific knowledge and to coercive measures based upon it (such as, for example, sanitary norms) has always been too easily defined as irrational and too quickly dismissed as reactionary. At least in the case of Seveso we can say that the vendéen reaction was brought about by the people’s bewilderment and anger when their attempt actively to face pollution was frustrated and they were left without a clear practical criterion for dealing with a polluted environment. We should remember that these people are not a primitive tribe unexposed to scientific thinking. They have a conception of safety and danger which is scientifically mediated. We ought to ask, perhaps, whether their very absorption of a scientific mentality, with its emphasis on certainty and objectivity, has determined their reaction of angry incredulity when the scientific apparatus has shown its limits. The thresholding and mapping, as Laura Conti recognizes, were motivated primarily by the political need to meet the popular demand for scientific reassurance. No wonder that, in finding out the cheat, the people’s reaction was “to throw out the baby with the bath water.”

There are other ways in which a vulgarized scientific mentality can account for the turn to scepticism by the people of Seveso. Like all of us, they have been taught to think of disease as a consequence of pathogenic organisms which can be isolated and attacked through scientific knowledge and technology. The nonspecific danger connected with an elusive scientific object like dioxin, whose presence is detected with so much difficulty and whose genetic and pathological consequences are so little known, could not easily be perceived by people used to a conception of disease as produced by a specific cause with specific effects. The pathogenic view of disease, either scientific or vulgarized, may dim our perception of other forms of danger. It may lead to an emphasis on the scientific defeat of some diseases while failing to perceive a general decline of health conditions and of levels of immunity. This, as Laura Conti reminds us, will be the fate of Seveso. The crime of Givaudan-La Roche, she argues, will hide its victims through the statistics of general mortality.

The people of Seveso have sometimes reacted irresponsibly, but the irrationality of their behavior should be judged in relation to the irrationality implicit in scientific mentality itself. Even their indiscipline against the safety rules can better be understood if we consider the authoritarian and mystifying implications of the scientific conception of health and disease. The pathogenic view of disease implies a strong emphasis on personal hygiene and discipline, and therefore it stresses personal responsibility
Dioxin waste from Seveso found in France

PARIS — A missing shipment of deadly dioxin-contaminated waste that had been the object of an international search was found in a French village yesterday, the Justice Ministry announced.

The ministry said the 41 containers of waste from a 1976 ecological disaster in Seveso, Italy, were found at an abandoned slaughterhouse in the village of Anguilcourt near the Belgian border. The ministry said statements by Bernard Parlingaud, manager of the firm that transported the waste into France in September, led to the discovery.

Parlingaud was arrested and charged with concealing the cargo's contents and destination. The waste, traced last March as far as a customs post in Saint Quentin near Anguilcourt, came from dioxin that leaked into the atmosphere in Seveso after a factory explosion in 1976.

The search for the waste began after a French scientific journal reported that 41 barrels of residue from the Seveso plant entered France from Italy last September and subsequently disappeared.

-Boston Globe 5/20/83

for health. At Seveso, the safety measures for Zone B, as we have seen, included a strong emphasis on personal hygiene. The vendéen trespasses on the prohibited zone and the display of disregard for the safety rules may have been an inarticulate protest against the official emphasis on personal responsibility for health, an emphasis which, in a situation like Seveso's, was obviously a lie.

Laura Conti offers an anecdote. A Seveso married couple go and speak to her, the husband says:

We’ve just married; we’d like to have a baby... We keep our house clean, we take a shower twice a day, we do whatever the Authorities say we should do in Zone B to keep safe... But a few days ago she left a window open; some people were harvesting corn, a polluted field, it was a windy day... Now there is dioxin in our bed... This image of helpless, blind obedience to official norms should be placed at the side of the vendéen actions in order to get a complete picture of a people confronted with the scientific-administrative management of industrial pollution. It is difficult to say which of the two attitudes is more rational. The belief in personal responsibility for health in a situation like Seveso’s and the belief that water can wash away the effects of exposure to dioxin seem to me as fully superstitious and blind as pulling down fences or reoccupying homes in the polluted zone. In these last actions, at least, we may trace a meaning as forms of desperate protest.

Any judgment of the behavior of the people of Seveso ought to be very cautious. I would not follow Laura Conti when she defines it as vendéen. It seems to me that her own attentive and sympathetic report shows the inadequacy of a too easy, too quick judgment against this behavior as irrational and reactionary. Mary Douglas writes in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology:*

Pollution ideas are adaptive and protective. They protect a social system from unpalatable knowledge. They protect a system of ideas from challenge. The ideas rest on classification. Ultimately any form of knowledge depends on principles of classification. But these principles arise out of social experience, sustain a given social pattern and themselves are sustained by it. (p. 245)
In the comments on Seveso, even those coming from the Left, the unpalatable knowledge seems to be a clear vision of the limits, faults, and drawbacks of our science. In the face of pollution its purity is emphasized; in the face of uncertainty, its method appears as the only way to reliable knowledge; in the face of class conflict and cultural conflict, its neutrality and objectivity are stressed. Still, at Seveso, this image has been shaken. Many people there have found it increasingly difficult to maintain an unquestioned belief in science. The struggle for a critical view of science is not fought only within academic circles, between new and old philosophies of science; it is also fought, as the case of Seveso shows, at the level of popular culture and in people's daily lives. The halo of purity surrounding science, sometimes thickened by theoretical dispute, is perhaps most effectively dispelled when many people cannot help but see that science does not always solve the problems of industrial pollution, that its notions of danger and risk are sometimes mystifying, that the cult of certainty and objectivity may actually interfere with prompt and effective precautions against danger.

What we learn from the popular experience at Seveso tends to increase our skepticism regarding the image of science as a neutral and always beneficial instrument of human needs. Skepticism means here a critical attitude, the ability to abandon illusions and to be open to alternatives. Articulating the dumb protest expressed by the *vendéen* actions at Seveso may well point in this direction rather than towards despair.

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Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others—the empires and native overseas. In the colonial to neo-colonial alchemy, gold changes to scrap metal and food into poison . . . .[We] have become painfully aware of the mortality of wealth which nature bestows and imperialism appropriates.

—Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins in Latin America*, 1973

The rise of the United States as an industrial giant corresponds exactly to the destruction and "underdevelopment" of Native America and, integrally, of our land, which is the centerpiece of the native political, spiritual, and economic society. The liberation struggle of Native America, in fact our whole legacy of resistance, is centered on this land. This struggle is not contained within "land ownership" in itself; while we have a dwindling land base and struggle to retain it, our relationship remains to the entire continent of North America, or more accurately the hemisphere. As John Trudell, a spokesperson for the American Indian Movement, explains, "The United States, or White People did not take the land; the land is still here—they are only occupying it." What we are tied to is our survival, with the understanding that our survival originates in the survival of the environments of this continent.
Within that context, the struggle to protect our environment is central to our liberation struggle.

Welcome to Native America

Lands reserved for Indians—"Indian reservations"—comprise some four percent of the original land base of "untamed," "hostile," indigenous America. Situated in the outback of rural America, reservations offer some of the richest veins of coal, uranium, oil, water, and other strategic resources in the continent. Additionally, we are adjacent to national parks, forest resources, and almost every military base in the western United States. We are geographically isolated from the American population centers, but surrounded by every imaginable strategic resource, from the Strategic Air Command to the Grants uranium belt.

The US economic system is resource-intensive, and Native Americans have always had the resources. Western Indian reservations overlie one-third of all western low-sulfur coal resources, one-half of "domestic" uranium supplies, and perhaps one-fifth of American oil deposits. Indians have water rights in at least a hundred water basins in the arid West. By the mid-1970s, four out of ten of the largest coal strip mines in the country were located on reservations. One hundred percent of all federally controlled uranium production originated in the reservations, and Indian people in North America were the fourth largest producers of uranium in the world. It seems appropriate then that we are governed by the Department of Interior. Situated between the Bureaus of Mines, Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife, and Land Management is the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We are legally the only humans treated as "natural resources" (America’s Heritage, etc...) in the continent. In that respect the government’s record of resource management has not been a happy one. In brief, per capita income in Native America is less than one-fourth the national average and unemployment averages 75 percent (recently exacerbated by federal budget cuts). Life expectancy hovers around fifty years of age, various forms of malnutrition (especially diabetes and chronic obesity) affect some 40 percent of the population, and teenage suicide rates and death by exposure are among the highest in the country. Finally, incarceration rates (juvenile and adult) are at five times the national average in the Indian community.

Throughout the history of treaty relations between the US and Indian nations, the US government has assumed responsibility for protection of Indian lands for Indian use. Yet the pattern of treaty abrogation has been consistent: as mineral or other resources desired for US economic expansion were found on Indian lands, the US moved to take the land—sometimes through direct treaty abrogation, sometimes indirectly. The Oklahoma Indian Territory was to become the homeland of ninety-seven Indian nations forcibly relocated from the eastern US in the name of "Manifest Destiny." By the mid-1850s, oil was discovered in the Oklahoma Indian territory, with one oil well in operation as of 1859. In 1866, the federal government demanded new treaties with the then Oklahoma-based Indian nations—and the treaties resulted in the loss of one-half of the Indian territory. By 1869, some 18,634 oil wells were in production in Oklahoma, and by 1899, over 69,673 oil wells dominated the landscape. The oil dynasties were born—and the second Indian territory was lost.

Similarly, when gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the US Calvary, in the area ostensibly to protect the Lakota Nation from invasion by white settlers, was used instead to promote
the invasion of the goldrush. The US unilaterally abrogated the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, cutting the Lakota Nation land base from a huge part of what is now North and South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska to a series of reservations.

The Navajo Nation as a Microcosm

The Navajo Nation in the southwestern United States is often viewed as a microcosm of energy colonization in Native America. The reservation is also a graphic illustration of reservations in the current overall context. At 17 million acres, or roughly the size of West Virginia, the Navajo reservation is the largest reservation in the United States. The Navajo population (Dine, or “People” is the name they call themselves) is, at almost 200,000 persons, the largest Indian population in the United States.

During the past hundred years, the Dine economy has been transformed from a relatively self-sufficient economy to one tangentially integrated into the US economy as a dependent and “underdeveloped” region. In other words, the Dine have gone from a “natural economy” to the status of internal colony.

The first significant stage in this transformation was that of military occupation, internment, and finally, the establishment of a colonial reservation for the Dine population. Military intervention by the United States into Dine territory occurred within twenty years after the “ownership” of the region was taken by the US from Mexico in 1846. By 1864, some 8,000 Diné had been incarcerated at Bosque Redondo in the New Mexico desert. In 1868, the Dine and the US signed a treaty “reserving” a land area for the Dine and guaranteeing “peace and friendship” between the two parties. Even after these traumatic ruptures in the Dine nation the
basic indigenous society remained quite intact. But the United States was not satisfied simply with land and "security" for settlers.

The second phase of foreign interference forced economic dependence on the Dine, and the "development" of a "civilized" wage-work economy on the people. In many ways, the consequences of this stage—both on the land and on the people—have been much more significant.

While livestock and a pastoral economy prospered in Dine society, America was still expanding, in particular in terms of resource requirements for a budding industrial society. By 1922, the Standard Oil Company discovered oil on the Navajo reservation, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs quickly set up a new "business council" of three Dine to sign oil leases on behalf of the Dine nation.

The creation of the Navajo Business Council facilitated the development of Navajo resources, which have proven to be quite substantial. In addition to some 400,000 acres of commercial forest, some 100 million barrels of oil, 25 billion cubic feet of natural gas, 2.5 billion tons of strippable coal reserves, and 80 million pounds of uranium rested beneath the land surface. Navajo mineral royalties grew from an average of $70,000 per annum in 1921-37 to $1 million annually from 1938-56, and finally $18 million by 1976. Although these amounts were only a pittance in relation to the resources' actual worth, this money provided much of the economic center for colonialism on the reservation.

A second trend increased the incidence of wage work on the Navajo reservation, and that was livestock reduction. Like most other Indian reservations, the Navajo reservation was, in its early stages, the site of a planned economy. The federal government distributed some 30,000
sheep and a number of other livestock to Navajo families at the onset of the reservation period in an effort to turn the Dine into Christian settlers. By 1934, the number of sheep on the reservation had increased to 1.3 million. In 1934, however, the federal government instituted a "stock reduction program" aimed at curbing overgrazing on the reservation. In the decade of the 1930s, Navajo livestock were reduced by approximately 30 percent, leaving a significant number of families without a source of subsistence.

The combination of resource development and livestock reduction forced the Dine toward wage work and toward an increasingly exploited relationship to the US economy. In 1942, some 58 percent of Dine families gained their major source of income from livestock and agriculture; 30 percent of the remaining income originated from wage work, 9 percent from arts and crafts, and 3 percent from other sources. By 1960, some 60 percent of Navajo income was from wage work, and by 1974 some 65 percent of Navajo income was originating from this source.

Dine resources have been of great importance to the United States, meeting changing demands in a changing technological society. Oil resources were, of course, the first exploited. In effect, through the policy of Business Council cooperation, a neo-colonial relationship was established in this first phase of resource development which has been utilized in each subsequent resource boom on the reservation.

The effects of this development scenario on the Dine Bii Kaya (the People's Land) and the Dine themselves have been disastrous in virtually every sense. First, the political impact of colonialism must be recognized in the transfer from self-reliance to dependent wage work. It is one thing to be a "colony" in regard to political control by the "mother" country. It is entirely different to be under both political and economic domination. Since the wages originate either from the federal government or from multinational corporations, "dependent development" is very prominent on the reservation.

The political and social consequences of recent Dine history must also be analyzed in terms of the traditional government/economic structures in Dine society, and their role in this era. It is impossible to simplify any native political system into a European analytical framework. Dine society, however, has certain traditional structures/institutions which for lack of better words should be viewed as matrilocal, others which are patrilocal, and yet others in which roles are shared. The clan/extended family system is one of these institutions, operating cross-sectionally in all aspects of Dine society. Through this system political decisions are made, economic plans are established and carried out, judicial processes are executed, and religious relations are continued.

Consider now the consequences of supplanting these institutions with a dependent wage work economy. Foreign institutions are established to replace traditional structures. Wage work goes hand in hand with the federally funded political institution. Foreign religious institutions bring new value structures into the native society. And interdependence (founded on community self-reliance) is replaced with foreign dependence. A very stark example of this process in action is in the resource development economics of the reservation. Here, the impact is extremely detrimental not only to Dine society, but to the land of the Dine also.

Employment on the reservation is still relatively scarce, scarcer yet in this most recent era of the Reagan administration. Sectors of full-time employment in the economy include pri-
primarily resource (coal, uranium, oil, natural gas) development, and federal (tribal council) employment. In the energy development sector, the labor force consists primarily of men; and in the government employment sector, the workers are mainly women. Not only does this type of economy promote a relatively distorted division of labor in Dine society, but the wage differentials in the larger context have factored in the creation of a class system on the reservation. To begin with, men have become the greatest “wage-earners” in the society; and that enhances the new (colonial) political/economic structure on the reservation. Simply stated, salaries in the uranium and coal mines are much greater (even at nonunion wages) than salaries originating from government work.

Secondly, the income differentiation between the wage workers and the traditional, self-reliant families is very significant. The wage workers would look toward more jobs in government and resource development, while the traditional class looks more towards preservation of the land, water, and traditional structures on the reservation. These dynamics constantly come in conflict on the reservation, and in the Indian community overall. For the wage workers, the resource development means more jobs, and more economic power. For the traditionalists, energy development means the destruction of grazing crop lands—the destruction of the land generally, which is the source of their life. The two different interests are perhaps best summarized in the words of people intimately involved in both interests, a traditional, land-based Dine woman and the past tribal chairman of the Navajo nation:

Where will we all be 20-25 years from now when the coal has all been mined and the companies operating these gasification plants have all cleaned up and moved away. There will be nothing there. They will all be working elsewhere and we will be sitting on top of a bunch of ashes with nothing to live on.

—Lucy Keeseewood, Coalition of Navajo Liberation

We wish to develop these resources in a way that will permit us and our children to live without having to be dependent on others. We wish to create industries on our reservations that will, in turn create jobs, so that, in time, we can attain economic security for our people

—Peter MacDonald, past Navajo Tribal Chairman.

Needless to say, the federal government and the multinationals have a keen interest in forcing this rift.

The Stakes

The stakes are very high in the Navajo nation, and even higher when multiplied by the resources elsewhere in Indian country. While the oil resources required by the American industrial state laid the groundwork for development (and the political infrastructure through the Business Council-Tribal Council) the continuing boom, corresponding to resource demands in the United States compounds the problems in the Southwest. In the area of the Navajo nation are some fifty-two operating uranium mines, ten uranium mills, four coal strip mines (averaging 20,000-40,000 acres each), and five coal-fired power plants. In 1975, the Navajo nation produced enough energy to fuel the needs of New Mexico and Arizona combined for sixteen years, yet 85 percent of the Navajo households had no electricity. Not only is the Navajo nation an energy
colony to the United States, but through the process of neocolonialism, it is en route to total economic cannibalism. The finite resources—coal, uranium, oil, natural gas, and water—are produced at such a rate, and with so few environmental safeguards, that the very core of the Dine Bii Kaya (the People’s Land) is being consumed in the process of “development.”

The effects of uranium mining and coal strip mining are particularly devastating. Two scientific organizations particularly intimate with these areas explained the same impacts in different terms. In describing the results of uranium mining on a region, Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory suggested that the land be “zoned into uranium mining and milling districts so as to forbid human habitation.” The National Academy of Sciences suggested that areas of the arid West slated for strip mining, “either be spared the burden of mining, or that they be declared ‘National Sacrifice Areas,’ where reclamation will not even be attempted.” In either case, the problem is the same: the land is destroyed by the primary stage of “resource development.” And in the case of most Indian reservations in the West the cumulative impact of these mining operations, combined with water diversion projects, waste dumps, and a variety of other indices of industrial progress, is a prescription for destruction.

Widespread radioactive contamination is already prevalent in the Grants Mineral Belt of the Southwest, the southern Black Hills, eastern Washington State, and the Snake River aquifer system. That contamination affects much of the western Indian community.

In spite of contamination (as elsewhere in the continent), there continues to be a push to develop more resources in Native America. That push comes from the tribal council sector of the Indian community. Many Indian activists term this condition one of being “economic hostage” to the United States—there are no jobs, no sources of money, and the development of energy resources is seen as the only option for economic development. Peter MacDonald, former tribal chairman of the Navajo reservation, and former chairman of the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT) expresses the view of many tribal councils when he talks about developing resources in order to “create jobs” and “attain economic security for our people.”

The Council of Energy Resource Tribes has been particularly instrumental in forwarding the development of Indian resources, even in light of the widespread environmental destruction caused by resource exploitation. CERT, formerly a coalition of some twenty-eight tribal councils on resource-rich reservations, conducted a series of feasibility studies on reservation-based projects, in addition to providing forums for energy company-tribal official meetings. Although a number of tribal councils have recently dropped out of CERT, its Denver offices have been a hubub of energy activity.

Traditional Indian people and Native environmental activists have challenged both CERT and the tribal councils repeatedly on energy development. Repeated arrests on the Navajo reservation (1974-83), for example, illustrate the “last resort” of the indigenous people.

“Resource development” is much more than an environmental issue in the Indian community. It is an economic, political, and religious issue and it is fundamental to our liberation struggle. Not only does it augment rifts in the community and irretrievably render lands uninhabitable but this “development,” in effect, makes us more than ever “economic hostage” to the United States. And when an economy is centered on uranium mining—with all of the
health, environmental, and moral implications involved—the "economic hostage" factor is very, very, important.

Water is another resource which is central to the Native American environmental and liberation struggle. Native people have always recognized that water is life, and that water is the key to survival. Most of America, however, has a notion of water as an infinite, replaceable resource—one which money will still buy. The planet is in the doorway of an incredible water crisis, largely due to over-industrialization of water-rich regions and ecological destruction of drier areas. The American West is a perfect example. Indian tribes legally hold the rights to most of the water west of the Mississippi, including the Colorado, Columbia, Snake, Missouri, Milk, and a number of other river basins. Theoretically Indian and non-Indian water interests could peacefully coexist, but the American way of planning has precluded non-competitive coexistence. As it stands, almost every Indian reservation in the United States either includes a Bureau of Reclamation Dam, or is bordered by a dam—servicing a metropolitan, industrial, or agricultural area. In at least 100 western water basins, Indian tribes are in litigation with non-Indian industrial, agricultural, and metropolitan water interests over "water rights."

Colonialism is central to the control over strategic resources. And the United States is one of the most advanced colonial powers in the world. Within that context, the resistance of native people and our struggle to protect our land and future is in conflict with a very large beast. We are, in the true respect, in the belly of the monster.

Trust Territories and the Wild Wild West Show

Exploitation and resistance go hand in hand. When the CONPASO Coal gasification complex (five coal gasification plants) became public on the Navajo reservation, the traditional people from the "chosen area" were outraged. With the help of the National Indian Youth Council, an Albuquerque-based organization, the local residents took the company and the Secretary of Interior to court. The case, National Indian Youth Council v. Andrus, was taken to court in 1980. Even before a verdict was reached, Consolidation Coal illegally began clearing land in the Burnham Chapter for the mining operations. The company moved equipment, graded land, and established a headquarters for company operations. In the process of clearing land, Consolidation desecrated five graves, among a series of other offenses. In reaction to the company’s behavior, Burnham residents took over the mine site. A delegation of approximately twenty people, led by elderly Burnham women, was met with twenty-seven squad cars from the Navajo tribal police. Burnham residents, and supporters from elsewhere on the reservation and in "Indian Country," including the American Indian Movement, maintained a site about 100 yards
from the Consolidation project headquarters. In early May of 1980, the Santa Fe (NM) judge hearing the case of National Indian Youth Council v. Andrus, reached a verdict in favor of mining operations.

Late in 1980, a sixty-eight year old Dine woman named Katherine Smith found the federal government putting a huge fence through her land at Big Mountain on the reservation. After telling the government crew several times that they had no authorization to section her land, she approached them one day with a shotgun. After a brief exchange of words, Katherine fired a few "warning shots" over the men's heads. She was later arrested, the hearing was delayed, and finally the court went out of business—but the precedent was set. As one Dine man from Big Mountain explained, "Someday it's going to get to the point where we're going to have to take the law into our own hands to prevent future destruction of our lives and our land. You're trying to force us to commit a crime just to protect our land."

Elsewhere in Indian country, similar occupations and actions have been both sporadic and ongoing. While the liberation/occupation of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota (1973) was a relatively well-publicized event, similar occupations have happened both prior to Wounded Knee and since that time. Not only must one recognize the history of Indian resistance to encroachment on the Native environment—since, in fact, the coming of Europeans to the hemisphere—but one must recognize that media coverage of the Native American struggle has been miniscule and distorted at best.

In 1941, the US government confiscated large land areas for the expansion of military bases. Again, much of this land was and is native. One of the confiscated areas was the Hawaiian island of Kaho'olawe. Although Hawaii was, in effect, still an occupied "trust territory," not having received the dubious honor of statehood until 1959, the military wanted the island to practice military maneuvers for the Pacific. Native Hawaiians were horrified at the theft and desecration of one of their most sacred islands. Shaped like a fetus within a womb, Kaho'olawe is understood to be the birthplace of Hawaii. In 1975, fifteen Native Hawaiians landed on Department of Defense territory—Kaho'olawe—and began an illegal occupation of their sacred island. They were all promptly arrested, but began what has blossomed into an escalating war between Hawaiians and the Department of Defense. Occupations, lawsuits, and finally negotiations are all tactics utilized by the Native Hawaiian movement. The navy is uncomfortable with being forced to negotiate with the indigenous people, and even more uncomfortable with having to concede both land and power to the natives. Increasing numbers of non-native people are supporting this struggle, but for many the concern comes not from an understanding of the centrality of Kaho'olawe to the Hawaiian people, but from a concern over nuclear weapons, and indignation that Kaho'olawe is the only national monument in the United States currently being used as a bombing range.

The relationship between the native and non-native Hawaiian community is only an aspect of the overall relationship between indigenous people and the "guests"—especially those who view themselves as progressive peoples. But it is illustrative at the least. Historically, indigenous people have been alone in our resistance, perhaps until the last fifteen years when the Left decided to take a notice, both of the environment and the people who live within it. Whatever relationship we have has developed pretty much within this time period—and for the establishment of trust that is too short of a time.
As it stands, the relationship between indigenous peoples, "the environmental movement," and "the Left" may be growing, but the foundation has not yet settled. Indigenous people retain a basic understanding that our poverty remains the wealth of non-indigenous people, and that even the "ecology movement" has an addiction, for the most part, to a certain level of technology and wealth. Those two requirements—technology and wealth—are fundamentally in conflict with the resources of the land and the protection of the environment, and consequently certain "concessions" must be made. Those concessions—such as the production of certain technological objects, the generation of electricity for metropolitan and industrial areas, and even the elevated use of water resources—represent a political, religious, and cultural conflict. There is, however, an understanding that we must work together, simply because the non-native American will always be here.

In very recent years, there has been the beginning of a communication, an exchange of thoughts, technologies, experience, and cooperation in struggle. Two consecutive events took place in South Dakota (1979-80), at the national Gathering of the People and the Sur-
vival Gathering. These were hosted by the Lakota (Sioux) nation and the Black Hills Alliance, a bicultural environmental organization. At the gatherings, people from around the world came to communicate on problems, ideas, strategies, and tactics—and I would say that it was the beginning of a small working relationship. But, within the context of our geographical, political, and cultural distinctions/isolation from the American state of mind—non-native America really must watch and look to our struggle, rather than waiting for us to come into a different society. History, success, and failure are all of our best teachers, and few people are brave enough to recognize a true history of resistance within a hemisphere. In all honesty, it is difficult to be patient with a colonial feeling of guilt—either for the environment, or for the people of the environment; and that is where many Americans have allowed themselves to complacently rest. However, neither the environment nor the native people will wait. We have no choice but to continue to fight the “frontier mentality” of America.

WINONA LA DUKE is an Anishinabe, from White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, who has been active for the past six years on economic and environmental issues affecting Native Americans. She is currently a staff consultant with the International Indian Treaty Council, working primarily on water and conservation issues and the reclaiming of her people’s land base.

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DIRECCION GENERAL DE HIGIENE Y SEGURIDAD OCUPACIONAL.
DEPARTAMENTO DE CAPACITACION.
MANAGUA, NICARAGUA LIBRE, 1982.
"AÑO DE LA UNIDAD FRENTE ALA AGRESION"

Title page of an information booklet published by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Labor, "Health and Safety for Agricultural Workers." The drawings used to illustrate this article are taken from the same booklet.
The following is an edited interview with a Canadian health and safety activist who in early 1983 spent a month in Nicaragua and two weeks in Costa Rica. We found his impressions of environmental health in the two countries to be quite valuable.

A consistent goal of the Reagan administration since taking office has been to sabotage the Nicaraguan revolution—by forcible overthrow if possible, otherwise by inflicting so much suffering that Nicaragua will cease to offer a positive example to people elsewhere in Central America.

As we go to press, the US government has stepped up its military provocations. The American media, although exposing the CIA’s “covert” action in Nicaragua, has tended to go along with the administration’s propaganda barrage as to what the Nicaraguan revolution is all about. Thus, we are glad to print an interview which we think gives a much more insightful look at the revolutionary process. Brophy does justice both to the dilemmas faced by revolutionaries in a desperately poor country and to the sense of genuine participation that has gripped so much of the Nicaraguan population.

Jim Brophy, formerly an auto worker in Windsor, Ontario, has been on the staff of the
Windsor Occupational Safety and Health Council for the past four years. The first half of his visit to Nicaragua was on a medical tour sponsored by FETSALUD, the national union of hospital workers, and the second half as a guest of the Ministry of Labor. He was in Costa Rica at the invitation of COSSAL, a program set up jointly by the country's four different national trade-union federations to deal with issues of health and safety.

The interview was conducted by Ann Haycox and Jim O'Brien.

What strikes you most in Nicaragua is the poverty. It's just incredible what the new government inherited. For a very large number of people I'm talking about things like no shoes, no medical care, not enough to eat. Two-third of the children under five were malnourished before the revolution. Things that we take for granted up here can be a real problem down there. Clean water, for example—that's something we don't even think about but it's almost nonexistent down there. Diarrhea has been the number one killer of children because of contaminated water.

It taught me a lot about a revolutionary society. I was active around opposing the Vietnam war, and I thought that I understood what went on in Vietnam. But it was clear to me when I went to Nicaragua how little I really did understand. These people inherited a society that had all the scars of a tremendous dependency, of a very undemocratic, dictatorial government, where workers had been brutalized by the most vicious kind of exploitation. And after the triumph, they were left to pick up the pieces.

And then whatever little strides they've been able to make, like to try to make health care available, to teach literacy, to try to wipe out polio—and 1982 was the first time in the history of Nicaragua that there were no new polio cases—every stride that they made like that, there's been an attempt to undermine it by the Americans. Reagan has done everything he can to destabilize their border, to make it impossible for them to get raw materials and parts. As a consequence, you've had an increase in plant closures. They've been forced to continually militarize their society to protect their revolution, to protect their lives in fact. It's really upsetting when you see the money that goes into putting trucks and whatever at the border and think about how that could be used for medicine and hospitals and schools, and what happens when it has to be diverted. It really had a very profound effect on me, especially the first week I was there. It's hard to communicate how it upset me. At one of the sessions when we got to talking about all this stuff, I just broke down.

The Problem of Pesticides

One of the things I was most interested in on my trip, both in Nicaragua and in Costa Rica during the two weeks I spent there, was the use of chemical pesticides. It shows a lot about the constant dilemmas they're confronted with in a poor country like Nicaragua, but it also shows something about the revolutionary process there.

Maybe I should start by talking about Costa Rica. In the agricultural areas there you see billboards everywhere advertising every imaginable kind of pesticide. What you don't see is any protection for the workers or for the environment. When I visited a Standard Fruit plantation in Costa Rica I was personally sprayed with pesticides. They sprayed the workers' homes, they sprayed them in the fields with carcinogenic pesticides. It's throughout the water supply. The labeling is only in English: "Don't put in the water supply," and so forth. The first clue that the workers had that this was some-
thing toxic was that all the fish died. And it said right on the label—in English—that this was very toxic to fish, and to keep it out of streams. Right now the banana workers’ union is trying to raise money to do a medical study on the high level of sterilization and miscarriages in the region. All kinds of acute symptoms, such as changes in skin coloring, nausea and headaches, are occurring. When any doctor tries to intervene on behalf of the workers, the multinational forces the doctor out of the region.

The workers make $150 a month if they are lucky. In 1976 there was a two-month strike to get access to electricity. Also in 1978 or ’80 they want on a two-month strike to reduce the number of bunches of bananas that one worker had to pull along an elevated cable from fifty bunches to twenty-five. That’s from two tons to one ton. When I was there at the plantation I was walking with the foreman and a worker stopped him to tell him that he had a hernia from pulling the bananas, and that he had a medical note from a doctor saying he shouldn’t be doing this. The foreman just laughed at him and said he’d have to go back to work or lose his job. I also met a woman that morning who had pesticide poisoning. She was vomiting and had discoloration of her skin. She was in an area where they were putting preservatives on the bananas just before packaging them.

Basic things like that, those kinds of working conditions, that kind of exploitation—it reminds you of what you read about industrial England. I don’t know if I’m convening that well enough, but that was just overwhelming the whole time I was there. I’m from Canada, and the American multinationals obviously dominate our economy—auto and oil and so forth. But what they’re doing in Central America goes way beyond that, because there aren’t any safeguards.

Here’s a story to give you an idea of how the government of Nicaragua acts quite differently than the rest of the region. You remember the problem with DBCP when workers in California were being sterilized? Well, when that pesticide was made illegal in the United States,
it got dumped and one of the places that it was shipped was Costa Rica. All the sterilizations came up again and the unions there began to demand that the government take it off the market. They had to have a study done on it, and I'm not sure, but it took at least a year while the pesticide was still being used. They tried to ship it into Nicaragua. The Ministry of Labor had the thing cut off in something like four days. Believe me, that is so different from the rest of the region. There is almost no control on pesticides throughout Central America other than Nicaragua.

That doesn't mean, however, that the pesticide problem is solved in Nicaragua. For instance, DDT is still being used in Nicaragua although they hope that this is the last year for it. I was on a coffee plantation and 2,4-D was being used. I have a picture of it. That one is still used in the US, too, but environmental groups are trying to have it banned. Most of the major chemical pesticides are being used in Nicaragua, in fact. It's a very big problem.

People in the health and safety branch of the Ministry of Labor told us that pesticides are their number one concern. They just turned out an excellent book, following up on the literacy campaign, that uses cartoons to educate people about pesticides. It's going to be used by the agricultural workers' union to train workers in the nature of pesticides. There's a very big campaign on correct handling and on protective equipment. But the problem with the protective equipment is that in the tropical climate there you can hardly wear a respirator for any time at all.

In Nicaragua, like all the countries of that region, agriculture was organized for the benefit of the multinationals, so that they were being forced to import food. A lot of their land was being used for the export crops like cotton, sugar, and coffee. So they're trying to change what is actually grown, and then to develop industry which will respond to new items, like fruits to be canned and so on. It's a very slow process. It's embarrassing to tell you about the DDT problem. They're worried that if they make a quick change, that they could lose the whole crop, which would mean literally hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign exchange which they need for medicine, for everything. It was a very sobering experience to see the situation that they're confronting. And that's what I mean about how I don't think I really understood Vietnam. I don't think I understood the conditions the people were fighting and what it means. Nicaragua was devastated by the Somoza regime and the civil war, but it's nothing compared to what kind of shape Vietnam was left in.

So you're caught in this kind of bind, where if you move too rapidly, without a changeover, and you lose a whole cash crop, boy you've done a lot of damage. The other problem is that a lot of the agricultural land is still in private hands. So you know you're kind of caught—
you’re very careful about not moving by fiat. A good example is that we saw a lot of Nestle’s baby formula down there. And we talked to people about it—why was this going on? And they went through this whole spiel about how it got into the country in the first place, then they said there was already this popular support for it—people thought it was supposed to be more nutritious, and I think there was kind of an angle that people thought breast-feeding isn’t civilized. Second, the government doesn’t want to operate by fiat, to say, We just won’t allow any more of it into the country, without an educational process where the mass organizations or the community organizations or the health unions demand that it be banned.

ATC, the peasants’ union, is very active in all of this. They’re the ones who are going to propose to the government what they want in terms of enforcement on health and safety. They want fines to be levied personally against the managers, and there’s some discussion of jail terms as well. This applies to government farms as well as private farms. They don’t want the fines to go just against the farm, so it’s just written off as an expense, but against the managers personally. But how exactly they’re going to regulate that, I don’t know.

The thing about the unions is, they aren’t unions on the Eastern European pattern, with a very hierarchical structure and the membership is nowhere. It’s not that kind of union scene. It’s a very, very grass-roots scene. They didn’t just come in and say, Okay, all government places, or all industry, now have unions. Because what happened was that the triumph in Nicaragua was a mass insurrection. And in preparation for it many, many organizations cropped up, like community groups, the women’s organization, Sandinista youth, and unions as well. They were part of that process, grew out of that atmosphere. So with the triumph unions appeared everywhere.

One night we were walking around Esteli and we just walked by the CST’s headquarters—it’s the biggest union in the country. And the place was just packed. We were standing outside listening, looking in the window, and we saw these older guys in there talking. It turned out later they were people who’d fought with Sandino. The meeting was completely packed. People are very excited. There’s a tremendous momentum in the revolution, and people really feel they can participate. And they’re really being encouraged to—not just, Participate in my program, hear this, but really in developing the demands and the activities, the whole works.

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The Popular Health Campaign

The popular health campaign is something they started after the literacy campaign, which they'd carried out right after the defeat of Somoza in the summer of '79. The literacy campaign had been a big success and they wanted follow it up, and health was an obvious thing to try to deal with. They mobilized *brigadistas* out of the unions, out of AMNLAE, which is the national women's organization, out of the citizens’ groups, teachers’ organizations, and so on.

One thing that's been very interesting about the campaign has been the way it raised questions about the role of the ordinary person and the role of the professional. Of course there were a lot of people who believed there was nothing they could do about health, that only doctors could deal with it. The same problem came up in the literacy campaign, too, apparently. People had to be convinced that it was their own activity, rather than some professional coming in, that would improve their situation. And that was a very big process, because people just didn't have the confidence. I talked with a Salvadoran woman who was involved for a year in the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, who's now an official of the El Salvador teachers' union. She said the campaign had tremendous political ramifications, because it challenged people's fatalism. It helped give them the idea that if they got together and studied their problems and pooled their skills and resources, they could make changes. It challenged their ideas about the division of labor.

Not surprisingly, there's a political tension between this kind of mass campaign on the one hand and on the other hand a concentration on developing more hospitals, more clinics, and so on. It's the difference between a preventive approach and a curative approach, between a mass participatory approach and a more professional approach. I'd say at this stage the mass approach is the stronger, but it's not resolved.

The progress they've made has been pretty striking. Diseases that come from poor sanitation, like dysentery, or like diarrhea among children, are being reduced quite a bit. And they're also dealing with problems of inequity. One of the big problems of medical care under Somoza was that only about 30 percent of the population even had a chance. Tetanus was one of the major killers of children, because it cost something like twenty cents for a shot, or thirty cents, and that was just beyond the means of most people.

It's hard to exaggerate the indifference of Somoza's regime to the people's health. I'll give an example that really struck me. You know, in the sort of common market of Central America, there was a division of labor as to who produced what. For instance, Costa Rica produced fertilizer, and Nicaragua was producing caustic soda as one of the components, and that created a very bad problem for Nicaragua. Pennwalt, an American multinational which produced caustic soda, dumped mercury into Lake Managua. Out of 150 workers there, 60 or
so had mercury poisoning. Many of them were so severely poisoned that they had to be removed from the workplace. They were dumping something like two to four tons of mercury a year into Lake Managua for twelve years. There’s a church group in New York, Churches for Corporate Responsibility, which is investigating possible court action in the US against Pennwalt. Mercury poisoning is a very, very bad disease. Remember the Japanese fishing village of Minimata? The workers are depressed all the time, the nervous system is attacked, it’s very painful.

Pennwalt is still manufacturing caustic soda there. That was one of the places I wanted to go, but we couldn’t get in there. The company’s pretty uptight about letting anyone in other than Ministry of Labor people. It’s a pretty tough situation. I wanted to go there because it’s the classic example, in the industrial sector at least, of how the multinationals operated in Nicaragua. Lake Managua is completely shot because of all the mercury.

The workers who were disabled by the mercury, it’s a bad scene. Some of them will show up at the Ministry with their families and start crying. One of the symptoms of mercury poisoning is that you’re continually depressed. The Ministry people don’t know what the hell to do.

One problem that’s come up repeatedly is that it’s often just not possible to get basic equipment. One example is that the ILO, the International Labor Organization, gave the Ministry of Labor $10,000 to buy some basic kinds of protective equipment: gloves, goggles, earmuffs, respirators, this kind of thing. They called a warehouse in the United States, and they went through the list of all the stuff they wanted, and the warehouse had it all. So they said, “Fine. We’d like you to send this stuff to such-and-such address in Managua, Nicaragua.” And the guy says, “I’m sorry, but we can’t do that.” The Ministry person says, “Listen, we’re not going to pay you in our currency, we’ll pay in American dollars.” The guy says, “I’m sorry, we can’t do it, we’re not allowed to send any material to Nicaragua.” What finally happened was that they worked out some complicated process where the stuff was sent to Costa Rica, and then to Nicaragua from there. But I hadn’t realized before I went down there that there was a boycott, let along how pervasive it is. And also, the tremendous damage it causes. We went to a pharmaceutical plant in Managua, and the union there told us that for over a month they weren’t able to produce any intravenous bottles. That’s because the Americans were supplying the caps, and the caps got cut off by the boycott. Very small items that we don’t even think about can really be major concerns down there.

One of the things I came away with, in fact, was an intense hatred of Reagan. When you see this country with the people struggling every day just to get by, it really hits home just how vicious the American policies are. Things like cutting off intravenous bottle caps, cutting off wheat and food, not to mention subsidizing the ex-National Guardsmen to invade the country—people who wouldn’t last five minutes inside Nicaragua if it weren’t for the American help. And then you think about how Reagan is portrayed in the media, you know, as kind of a nice guy, a bit of a bungler but really goodhearted. It’s incredible.

By the same token, I should add that people I talked with there are aware that there’s a lot of opposition in the US to Reagan’s policies. It’s a source of hope to them, and they’re grateful for it.
The black lung movement began spreading through the hills of southern West Virginia in the fall of 1968, the year that saw the violent climax to nearly a decade of political protest all over the world. In its marches, songs, and confrontational tactics, the movement was clearly heir to the struggles over civil rights, the Vietnam War, and other issues. But in social base and political focus, the black lung movement departed from the decade in which it was born. Drawing participants not from the margins of the economy but from its core, the movement was solidly grounded among workers and their families. It represented the historical possibility that the spirit of rebellion against authority and oppression that characterized the 1960s was beginning to permeate the working class.

To progressives within and without the labor movement, the issue at stake in the black lung struggle made it unique and promising: it was the first mass movement over occupational disease in the history of US labor.¹ Belief in the political potency of this issue grew as the movement reached beyond the coal fields and inaugurated a ferment over occupational safety and health that continues to brew in many industries. Textile workers consciously fashioned their brown lung movement after the black lung struggle. Asbestos workers pressed for a national compensation system, similar to the black lung benefits program, for

their disabling occupational lung diseases. Plant health and safety committees, collective bargaining demands concerning occupational safety and health, legislative reforms and multi-industry health and safety coalitions—all proliferated since the black lung movement.

For many hopeful observers and participants, this activism over occupational safety and health initially seemed to portend momentous changes in the labor movement. Health and safety in the workplace represented a “quality of work life” concern; it threatened to disrupt the trade-off between steadily increasing productivity and “bread and butter” benefits (increased wages and fringes) that was the cornerstone of postwar collective bargaining. Rank-and-file workers striking over black lung promised to bring to the bargaining table not just occupational safety and health, but many shop-floor issues that had been systematically excluded from labor-management negotiations for a quarter-century. In a period of upheaval in several industrial unions, occupational health and safety held potential as a rallying issue for rank-and-file insurgencies that might even overthrow the entrenched leadership.

Occupational safety and health also seemed to carry an inherently radical political content. No other workplace issue pointed so directly and poignantly to the intrinsic conflict between workers and management, or to the contradiction between well-being, even life, and profit. Behind workers’ demands that management clean up the workplace loomed the larger, more explosive question of who controls the workplace: by presuming to define and fight for certain work practices and conditions, workers were encroaching on managers’ jealously guarded prerogative to run the workplace as they saw fit.  

Astoundingly, for a brief period all of these optimistic prophecies seemed fulfilled in the United Mine Workers. The black lung movement did escalate rank-and-file disaffection with the union’s old guard, and contributed to an insurgent movement that eventually booted them out of UMWA headquarters. Contractual and legislative gains in health and safety and other areas accompanied the rank-and-file movement. Industrial relations became increasingly antagonistic and combative. By the mid-1970s, the coalfields were in “a state of anarchy,” according to one industry official, and wildcat strikes exploded to a frequency and duration unprecedented in US labor history.

Yet today, a newcomer to the coal fields would be hard pressed to find evidence of the recent period of tumult and reform.* The elation of formal victories faded long ago, replaced by discord and confusion as activists attempted to reconcile their competing political agendas with each other and with the slow and partial results that victory seemed to bring. As the movements for black lung compensation and union reform weakened and broke apart, many raised questions about the movement’s political goals, strategies, the significance and effectiveness of legislative reforms, the relationship between their leaders, organizers and constituents, and so on.

This article represents one voice in that many-sided debate. It reexamines the history and politics of the black lung movement, as expressed in written documents and retrospective interviews with its participants. The first three sections situate the movement within its historical context and chronicle its course. A final analytical section focuses on the interplay between the aspirations of the movement and

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*This is despite the recent election of a relatively progressive candidate, Rich Trumka, as UMWA president. His candidacy did not generate a mass movement, and the implications of his election remain to be seen.
the political process through which activists hoped to realize them. The black lung movement apparently achieved its concrete, short-range goals—with more striking victories than probably any other occupational safety and health campaign to date. Yet, as has occurred with so many political movements in the US, what many saw as its underlying meaning and potential remained elusive: a safe and healthy workplace; a union dedicated to occupational health and safety; a fair and equitable system of compensation for black lung disease. This article suggests that a major reason for this frustrating pattern lies in a fundamental feature of the political reform process itself: it grants the goals of a political movement only insofar as it also redefines and circumscribes them.

To the extent that this article explores limitations in the black lung movement, it is not in any way meant to belittle the courage and sacrifice that the struggle demanded of its participants. Rather, it is intended as a tribute to those who made a history worth recording, one that demands analysis, and from which others hopefully can learn.

The Setting

All my life, as far back as I can remember, I’ve known coal miners had a lung problem. My father, my husband, my brother—Lord, I’ve lived with it! My Dad retired in '48; he had 35 years in. He would come home and would be give out. I remember him coming home, layers of dust on him, and he'd stretch out on the porch. Everyone then would have to bathe, they didn’t have a bathhouse. We would be feeding the chickens, cooking the dinner, and he still wouldn’t be taking his bath. He’d be give out, couldn’t breathe at all; he’d just lie there. They left him off on the other side of the road, and he’d have to stop two or three times before he could get here.

Everyone was aware that there was a lung problem. OK, see: the doctors were very much company owned. They saw it but they were afraid to call it that. The coal companies sent all their business to the hospitals and clinics, and they were afraid that if they found too many out of a workforce with it, the company would pressure on 'em. I know it worked like that. They called it miners’ asthma. They said coal dust was good for you. They said it was good for you!...3

The bitter legacy of company physicians, who considered miners’ lung disease a benign, nondisabling “asthma,” was one of the most important factors in the development of the black lung movement. Unlike asbestos-related lung disease and certain other occupational illnesses, there is little evidence that the results of black lung research were suppressed. Company physicians, hired by and accountable to the coal operators, simply never investigated the disease in the first place. Indeed, black lung acquired popular names and a definition from its victims long before the medical profession accepted its existence. Coupled with many physicians’ continuing effort to minimize the extent and severity of black lung, the history of company doctors produced a righteous anger and skepticism toward the medical establishment that was one of the great ideological strengths of the black lung movement.4

The roots of the movement also lie in the economic hardships and uncertainty of the 1950s and early 1960s in Appalachia. By 1950, the rapid loss of markets in commercial and residential heating and the railroads persuaded many large coal producers that they had no choice but to mechanize their mines. UMWA president John L. Lewis required no pressure to support this economic strategy: he had long believed that mechanization would produce a prosperous, streamlined industry, high wages for miners, and institutional security for the union.

But for miners and their families, the immediate impact of mechanization was disastrous. Unemployment soared along with productivity: between 1950 and 1970, the workforce dropped by 75 percent, while output per worker tripled. Supervision intensified and working conditions deteriorated as the union’s top leaders refused to pursue the multitude of grievances generated by changes that they endorsed. In underground mines, noise levels rose and machinery hazards increased. But above all, there was the dust. One veteran of this period, a miner who later became a leader in the black lung movement, recalled:

Once, in 1953, they started mechanizing the mines, then we really had a dust problem. Companies brought in big powerful machines and put less emphasis on getting air across the face and no water on the
equipment. Well, at the time, the union—it seemed to me it was on a standstill. It didn’t put too much emphasis on account of prices. Safety, hmpf, a man would say anything and the next thing you know he was transferred to the hoot owl and then they run him off.  

Coal-dependent communities became ghost towns in the wake of this technological and economic transformation, their complex web of kinship, neighborhood, and work relations unraveled by unemployment and migration. Left behind were often the old, sick, disabled, along with the aging generation of miners who managed to keep their jobs.

Initially, many managed to subsist on special programs sponsored by the Welfare and Retirement Fund, a union-controlled and company-financed system of pensions and medical coverage established under the 1946 UMWA contract. But during the fifties and early sixties many found their benefits cut back or eliminated altogether. Stagnating coal output and questionable investment decisions produced severe revenue crises in the fund. Led by John L. Lewis, the trustees established increasingly strict and arbitrary eligibility standards for pensions and medical coverage, eliminated rehabilitation and cash assistance to disabled miners and widows, and sold the fund’s ten hospitals to the Presbyterian Church. Concerned above all for the operators’ ability to mechanize and to compete successfully with alternative fuels, Lewis refused to seek an increase in the royalty payments that financed the fund.  

By the early sixties, these fundamental and interrelated changes in the coal mine workplace, community, and union generated increasingly vocal protests. In southern West Virginia, a succession of disabled miners and widows' organizations arose to dispute the Welfare and Retirement Fund’s eligibility requirements for pensions and medical coverage. Simultaneously, the war on poverty unleashed in the hills a small army of community organizers, who agitated for greater popular control over many public institutions and programs—schools, county government, community action agencies, and so forth. These organizers and many of the ideas they popularized, especially constituent control of government programs, would surface again soon in the black lung movement.

Finally, by the mid-sixties the fortunes of the coal industry began to shift. Nourished by the Vietnam War, an expanding utility market, and the UMWA’s cooperation, coal made a comeback. In the deep mines of depopulated southern Appalachia, a shortage of experienced miners developed. The economic well-being of enhanced miners’ job security, made strikes a more potent weapon, and rankled workers already beginning to question the sluggish collective bargaining advances of their union leaders. The huge mines that lie in a wide axis around the adjoining borders of West Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania became an explosive nucleus of rank-and-file discontent; it increasingly took the form of wildcat strikes, insurgent campaigns for union office, and challenges to the chair at UMWA conventions.

Into this tinderbox of agitation and converging social changes flew the spark—literally—that ignited the methane gas and coal dust in Consolidation Coal Company’s No. 9 mine near Farmington, West Virginia. On a cool fall morning, November 20, 1968, seventy-eight miners perished beneath the earth in one of the worst mine disasters in the nation’s history. The black lung movement was born.
The Black Lung Strike

The first evidence that coal miners were ready to fight for black lung compensation and prevention came in the fall of 1968, at the UMWA convention. Delegates representing locals from Illinois to Virginia arrived with an unprecedented number of resolutions concerning the disease. They demanded a contractual dust standard and mandatory dust suppression to prevent black lung, and put forward a variety of financial schemes to compensate the victims. All compensation resolutions insisted that the coal industry was at fault, and should pay for any disability benefits. For example, miners from Keen Mt., Virginia, demanded: “Be it resolved, that the company would have to pay them their full annual income for destroying their health.” The delegates unanimously passed a resolution calling for campaigns in all UMWA districts to force passage of bills including black lung as a compensable disease under workers’ compensation statutes.

Many miners returned home from the convention expecting their union to lead the crusade for black lung prevention and compensation. One physician who supported the movement recalled: “See, the miners themselves were the ones really agitating for it. They came back from the Denver convention all fired up. They thought the union was going to lead the way. They had become increasingly aware of the problem.” The miners were disappointed. Union negotiators failed to make respirable dust control a priority in the 1968 collective bargaining talks, and the resulting contract made only traditional monetary gains for the rank and file. In southern West Virginia, a small delegation of miners met with UMWA district officials to request assistance in lobbying for workers’ compensation coverage of black lung. They were rebuffed.

Miners in West Virginia then turned to the few local physicians who supported their cause. An implicit strategy rapidly evolved out of their informal conversations and meetings: they would hire their own lawyer to draft and lobby for a bill to include black lung under West Virginia’s workers’ compensation statutes. Speeches, rallies, and leaflets would spread the word throughout the coal fields of the state.

This marked a little-noticed but exceedingly important turning point in the early political orientation of the black lung movement. Leaving behind pursuit of contractual dust control and direct modification of the workplace, activists decided to seek compensation through legislative change. Many believed that this reform would motivate the operators indirectly—through their wallets—to clean up the mines. As it turned out, this financial incentive for prevention did not materialize, for reasons that will be explored later; however, black lung compensation in and of itself proved to be an extraordinarily popular issue. This was fortunate not only for the eventual strength of the movement, but also for the protection of these initial activists. By pursuing legislative reform without official union cooperation, this small group set out on a collision course with the UMWA leadership.

Despite internal disagreements, lack of financial resources and realistic fears of being fired and blacklisted, these first activists took the steps necessary to spur a movement into life:

The first thing I heard about, they gave me a call they was going to have a meeting over in Montgomery, over at City Hall. We had a meeting over there, about 15 or 20 of us. Everyone was afraid they was going to get fired. We needed three, four, $5,000 on Monday morning to pay the lawyer. I don’t remember how much, but nobody had it.
The main thing they was a-worrying about, the men was worried the company would come down on 'em, fire 'em. I don’t think anybody had any idea—when we went over there for a meeting—I don’t think anybody had any idea we would be able to accomplish anything.

The meeting just about broke up and everybody started home. Some were afraid we just couldn’t raise the money. So we got down on the street—Charles Brooks, Woody Mullins, Lyman Calhoun, and a few others. We stopped on the corner and we said we just couldn’t be defeated. If we had to sell peanuts on the corner, we had to raise that money.9

They succeeded. Local unions up and down the Kanawha Valley donated as much as $1,000 each to the new organization, the Black Lung Association. Word of the movement spread rapidly through rallies and leaflets and, probably more important, through the social bloodstream of the area. The initial group of activists formed the nucleus in an extremely complicated web of family, community, and union relationships that is so characteristic of the southern Appalachian coalfields.

Women, for example, soon began to participate in the movement, beginning with the wives of the core activists. One woman, who subsequently became the hard-working leader of one black lung chapter, recalled:

In 1969, women wasn’t going to as many things as they are now. When they formed the Black Lung Association out at Montgomery, it was all men. So Mr. Calhoun used to report in to me, call me and tell me all about what took place. One day he said, “Why don’t you come to the meeting yourself?” I said, “I can’t go up there. That’s just a bunch of men. No women comes.” And he said, “Well, Mrs. Malay comes.” So his wife and Mr. Mulins’ wife and Mr. Sturgill’s wife and me all started going.

Throughout the winter of 1968-1969, black lung rallies in the coal camps of southern West Virginia grew in size and exuberance. Every weekend, miners, miners’ wives, and widows met in churches, schools, local union halls and, when there wasn’t a place large enough to accommodate them, out of doors in the snow. Featured attraction was a “real dog and pony show” put on by three physicians:

We would open with a prayer. Buff [a physician] would take them lungs and act ...well, he went a bit too far sometimes. It’s like this, you see, very few people ever saw a set of lungs. He told the men about the bad lungs and he’d yell, “Feel ’em! Feel ’em!”

The appeal of the movement, which by now was deemed worthy of national news coverage, inevitably provoked a response from the United Mine Workers leadership. District officials in southern West Virginia at first submitted their own compensation bill to the state legislature in an effort to subvert the momentum of the rank-and-file upsurge. They then declared open season on the black lung activists by charging them with dual unionism and forbidding local unions to donate money to their Association.

Both efforts failed. Not only was there solid, widespread support for the Black Lung Association, the appeal and meaning of the movement had gone far beyond support for a compensation law: it represented a tumultuous reassertion of the rank-and-file voice that twenty years of unemployment, forced migration and official union indifference had silenced.

By mid-February, the legislative session was more than half over, and there was no apparent progress on the black lung bills. Miners grew increasingly restless and talk of a wildcat strike began to circulate among black lung activists and local union leaders. On a Tuesday morning, February 18, a local dispute at the East Gulf mine in Raleigh County idled 282 miners. Reporters attempting to cover the wildcat received conflicting accounts of its cause. One miner was quoted in the morning paper: “We feel like we should support Dr. Buff with some action. The legislature is not bearing down, they’re letting it cool off too much.”

Like an uncontrollable chain reaction, within hours mines began closing at Itmann, Eccles, Slab Fork, and other adjacent communities in Raleigh and Fayette Counties. By Tuesday night, nine mines were down. On Wednesday, roving pickets, word of mouth, and brief accounts in the news helped to spread the strike west and south into Wyoming, Logan, Mingo, and McDowell Counties. Within three days, 10,000 miners were on strike.

It spread like wildfire after it hit the news. I think mainly what really ignited it was the fact that we had organized and come out publicly and the men at the mines saw the goddamn coal operators couldn’t touch us, then they really come out. It just spread like wildfire.
Behind the seemingly spontaneous mass action were the efforts of countless miners who organized themselves into roving pickets. With the southern mines shut down in a matter of days, miners headed north to other coal-producing counties.

I went and picketed one mine and others went and picketed another. I come and talked to the president of my local and he called the presidents of other locals. He told the men what it was about. Course, we had got it on the news so it was well known.

So, we went over to Kanawha County, Boone County. Once we got a mine out over there, we’d turn it over to them and they’d take care of it so it wouldn’t run everybody to death. Most of the time they’d hold a meeting and the man who’d started that mine, he’d get up and explain what it was about.

We run two brand new cars out working on this thing. We went up to Morgantown to get those boys to help us. They didn’t cotton to us too well at first, but then when the strike got going, they helped us out.

At that time, this was the biggest coal state in the country. If nothing else, we’d go up there, go to the mine and get with one man, whether we knew him or not, and explain it to him. And he’d say, “Okay, you boys go back to Mingo County or wherever you belong and we’ll take care of it here.” The next day all the mines over there would be out.\textsuperscript{14}

At the beginning of the walkout, there was a significant but abortive attempt to broaden the movement to include other workers and their occupational diseases by pulling a general strike in the Kanawha Valley. Regardless of its failure, this effort reflects the heady atmosphere of political potency and radicalism that infused the black lung movement during these days.

I don’t know who started it, but somebody mentioned, let’s go shut the Alloy [chemical] plant down, because they had mines too. So they wanted to go and shut the plant down. We was going to get it for occupational disease, any lung disease. Anyone that had anything wrong with their lungs would get it.

When we went to Alloy, they tried to run over top of us. We didn’t have any business there, they said, we was talking about black lung. People from Alloy, they get that dust, well, it’s more like silica dust, and they’re just as bad off, a lot of ’em, as bad off as the coal miners. They was afraid their company would find it out and would fire ’em. Most of ’em didn’t have much backbone to get out and fight for their own rights. They was very much, very much against us. Even some of my friends worked at Alloy. They was really against us.

What we intended to do was to shut the whole place down. All these places. Our idea was if we could shut Alloy down, we could shut the whole valley down—Belle, South Charleston, all of it. The idea was to make it a general occupational disease, you know. But it didn’t work. They just weren’t about to come out.\textsuperscript{15}

With coal production throughout the state brought to a standstill, activists’ attention shifted to the legislature. Miners began pouring into Charleston, the state capital, roaming through the halls of the statehouse and packing
the galleries of the legislative chambers. One of the few legislators who supported the black lung movement described the atmosphere:

The miners started flooding into Charleston, lining the galleries in large numbers. You know what happens when you get large numbers of people together and they’re discontented. There was a lot of noise, a lot of talking. It was like sitting on a razor’s edge. These guys, the miners, had been waiting in the galleries and they didn’t know what was going on. They didn’t understand about first reading and second reading and third reading and all this.

Meanwhile, the big oaken doors had been shut, pulled on rollers. This wasn’t like just closing any door, you had to roll these heavy things shut. And the State Police were in the cloakroom in the House of Delegates, all because the miners were there. You have to understand the situation in there. It was really getting bad. I mean, if somebody had stood up and said something really inflammatory, there would’ve been a riot.

So I stood up and told the Speaker, “I see the doors are closed and there’s an armed guard in the cloakroom.” I said, “Open the door so I can go out ’cause if

*Douglas Yarrow, Charleston Rally, 1969.*
there’s going to be trouble in here. I want to be out there with my friends.” Well, that brought down the house.\textsuperscript{16}

On February 26, a special demonstration in Charleston drew convoys of buses and cars carrying miners from all over the state. Following a rally at the Municipal Auditorium, miners marched down the main thoroughfare, Kanawha Boulevard, toward the statehouse. Inside the building, work came to a halt and politicians gathered around the windows to watch the miners approach. The tense, apprehensive atmosphere brought West Virginia’s Republican governor, Arch Moore, to the steps of the capitol to greet the miners. His efforts to reassure them by stating that he would introduce a black lung bill during a special session of the legislature if the current legislation failed to pass brought forth a unanimous roar: “No! No! No! Now! Now! Now!” The miners swept past the governor and up to the locked doors of the House of Delegates:

We marched up there and there was State Police at the doors. But with that many of ’em the State Police just stepped aside. They had the doors locked at the House of Delegates. The men just walked up there and asked the guards, they said, “This is a public place. Are you going to let us in, or do you want us to kick it down?” They let us in.\textsuperscript{17}

As miners ringed the galleries and exerted the pressure of their presence, the legislators attempted for days to come up with a bill that would satisfy conflicting political forces and considerations. At issue was the definition of disease—on which compensation eligibility would hinge—and a legal presumption that the disease was work-related. The Black Lung Association backed legislation that gave a generous definition to compensable lung disease and presumed its work-relatedness. The West Virginia Medical Society and Coal Association, for differing reasons, pushed to confine the definition of disease and compensation eligibility. As miners looked on, their apparently clearcut demand for black lung compensation was digested and re-defined through a legal and political process that they could influence but could not control. Finally, ten minutes before the legislative session was due to adjourn for the year on March 8, compromise legislation passed both the House and Senate.

The leaders of the Black Lung Association and the few professionals who had served as their advisers were in an extremely difficult and pivotal position at this point. The miners looked to them for an analysis of the legislation and for guidance as to whether they should continue the strike. This placed a burdensome responsibility on these people, many of whom would not have to bear the consequences of a prolonged strike, and who were without any coherent, long-term political strategy. One organizer recalled:

There was a mass rally in Beckley. It was huge, overflowing. We had a meeting before it in Rasmussen’s office with the Black Lung Association, Kaufman, a few others. We were trying to decide what to do. One guy at the meeting wanted to end the strike, get it over with, not be pointed to as part of it. And one of the BLA officers kept saying something like, “I want to get the monkey off my back.” It was clear at the rally that the miners wanted guidance in what to do. One of the legislators we had worked with got up and told them to go back to work, that they had won a great victory, that they should go back to work. And then he turned to me, and I’ll never forget it, he said, “It’s not worth the paper it’s written on.’
Nobody took a strong position at that rally. I didn’t. I mean, I made a feeble attempt. I said, “This is not anywhere near what we needed.” But it was just too heavy a responsibility on anybody to keep the strike going. Nobody was together enough to think of an alternative strategy. The thing was—“Stay out till the govern-
or signs it.” Of course he was going to sign. But they thought they’d stay out till then, make a big show of force. 18

On Tuesday, March 11, Governor Arch Moore signed the bill into law. Within 24 hours, the black lung strike was over.

**Carry It On:**
**The Movement Continues**

Neither the drive for black lung compensation nor the ferment over workplace health and safety died with the end of the black lung strike. Both were fundamentally shaped, however, by events that swiftly followed and partly resulted from the strike. Drawing encouragement and a potential political base from the active disaffection in southern West Virginia, Joseph A. (“Jock”) Yablonski soon announced his insurgent candidacy for president of the United Mine Workers. While black lung activists and reformers throughout the coal fields were busy with this campaign, members of Congress debated the most comprehensive occupational safety and health legislation ever proposed at the federal level.

The US Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 spelled out precise, mandatory procedures regarding roof support; ventilation, electrical equipment, and numerous other aspects of working conditions. To prevent black lung, the act set an unusually low respirable dust standard in underground mines. Operators were required to monitor respirable dust levels through a periodic sampling program. The Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare was to set up a black lung screening program for miners; those with evidence of the disease had the right to transfer to a less dusty work area with no loss of pay.
Title IV of the act established a temporary compensation program for miners disabled by black lung and for the widows of miners who died from the disease. Benefits were to be paid for three years out of the federal treasury, then revert to the state workers' compensation system, provided that the state met certain criteria established by the Secretary of Labor. The program was designed to pacify the aroused constituency of older miners and widows, many of whom would not be eligible for state workers' compensation due to statutes of limitations, and to subsidize the coal industry's human health toll. However, lacking accurate prevalence data and the foresight to anticipate activists' successes in liberalizing eligibility criteria, no one had any concept of how expensive the benefits program would become. Democrats pooh-poohed Republican estimates of a $384 million annual bill as a scare tactic designed to defeat Title IV. Little did they know that black lung benefits would eventually drain the federal treasury of over $1 billion each year.

In the coalfields, the federal compensation program became the impetus for a resurgence of the black lung movement. Disappointment and unrest originated in the strict eligibility standards for benefits that the Social Security Administration, responsible for the program, promulgated. The agency based its eligibility criteria on a rigid and narrow medical definition of black lung, which limits miners' occupational lung disease to one clinical entity, coal workers' pneumoconiosis, and considers it disabling only in its most advanced stages. Reactions from bewilderment to outrage greeted the denial letters that Social Security sent out in the fall of 1970. Many with a lifetime of work in the mines and serious breathing trouble were denied benefits; others (some with apparently less respiratory disability) received compensation. In the eyes of black lung victims and their widows, the eligibility determinations were completely arbitrary.

Unlike the massive rallies and spontaneous strike, the second phase of the black lung movement that soon ensued was to a much greater extent the product of deliberate political organizing. Aware of discontent over the federal compensation program, in 1970 several community organizers, many of whom had earned their stripes in the war on poverty, began to collaborate in reviving the movement. One organizer recalled:

After Yablonski's murder, there was no organization in the southern part of West Virginia, and I and a few others realized we needed an organization. There were clusters of people scattered through the southern part of the state, organized in different ways. Some were organized along the lines of disabled miners, and then there was the Appalachian Volunteers and VISTAs. The original Black Lung Association by this point was a mythical thing, just a few people up Cabin Creek. Somewhere the disabled miners got active, and there was a real big strike over hospital cards. This was the summer of 1970, and it was the first big thing they did after the black lung strike. When that happened, we really saw the need for organization. People went around and started organizing black lung chapters.

I saw the whole thing as, all of the problems in the area—black lung was one of them—and the source of all of them was the coal industry. The union was the one thing that could stand between miners and the coal companies. You had to reform the UMWA for it to put pressure on the operators to clean up the mines. Black lung was like strip mining; that was
just the issue at the time. It was a very good issue, and you could get money out of it. A lot of money came into this area as a result. Of course that was also a problem: you weren’t organizing for any long-term goals, other than reformist kinds of things. Actually, changing the union was always my main interest, my personal interest.

As this quotation suggests, the political content of the black lung chapters was ambiguous; it would eventually become a source of conflict. Many organizers viewed the chapters as vehicles for maintaining an insurgent spirit and organization within the union. Others stressed their role in lobbying for reform of the laws and regulations governing the federal compensation program. To the countless miners and widows for whom black lung benefits meant the difference between always doing without and a slim margin of comfort, the chapters simply provided a greatly needed concrete service—claims assistance.

At the core of each chapter were the miners, miners’ wives, and widows who were trained as lay advocates in federal black lung compensation. The popular appeal of the service they offered, individual claims assistance, was gigantic. In a county with a few capable lay advocates, the black lung chapter could easily draw forty-five people to a meeting—most hoping to tell of their hardship and receive assistance with their claim.

Augmenting the political clout of the Black Lung Associations were the press releases, news conferences, and media events choreographed by young organizers working out of a Charleston storefront. Their office was the hub of the BLA communication network: it served as a meeting place for activists from all over southern West Virginia, southwest Virginia, and eastern Kentucky, and its staff irregularly sent out an assortment of newsletters and bulletins. They also hired an older miner from Cabin Creek to work as an organizer and as titular head of the movement; his name was Arnold Miller.

In 1972, the work of claims assistance, organization building, and political lobbying climaxed with passage of the federal Black Lung Benefits Act. This legislation amended Title IV of the 1969 act by broadening the definition of potentially eligible claimants and easing their burden of proof. Much more politically sophisticated than when the 1969 act was passed, BLA leaders realized this reform would be meaningless if the Social Security Administration again promulgated stringent regulations to implement the law. After intensive pressure, agency representatives made an important, unusual concession: they paid for a committee of BLA representatives to travel to Washington, D.C., and to participate in drawing up the new regulations. The result was an interim period of exceedingly liberal eligibility standards, under which thousands of claims were awarded.

1972 also saw the election triumph of Arnold Miller and the insurgent movement within the United Mine Workers. The dangerous, grueling work of building the Miners for Democracy soon began to pale, however, next to the tortuous complexity of making reform an institutional reality. The years following the MFD victory were full of political intrigue, internal disputes, and wildcat strikes. For the Black Lung Associations, they were years of fragmentation and decline.

In this period of disintegration, many political differences and weaknesses inherent in a single-issue compensation movement became apparent. The appeal of the black lung chapters and the size of their social base fluctuated enormously with changes in the eligibility require-
ments for benefits. Under the liberal "interim standards" thousands received benefits and no longer required the assistance of the BLAs. When the standards were tightened and administration of the program shifted to the Department of Labor in 1973, winning a claim became difficult that even a highly skilled lay advocate often could not make a difference in the outcome. One organizer commented:

Participation was all based on the ups and downs of the claims thing. They agreed to let some older people through in the '72 amendments in exchange for a drastic cutoff. By 1974, it was pretty clear that they were really slamming the door in people's faces...The number of turn-downs was so high, demoralization was creeping in. There was more infighting between the chapters.21

US Department of Labor administration of the compensation program also made ongoing constituent input and control a more remote possibility, both geographically and politically. Prior to 1973, the local Social Security offices provided an accessible political target, a pressure point on the program's administrators, and a place where activists could educate claimants and build their organization through picketing and leafletting. The Department of Labor initially processed claims almost entirely at its headquarters in Washington, D.C., helping to shield the program from its constituents. Coupled with the denials, delays, and bewildering regulations that characterized the black lung program, this situation produced enormous frustration among many claimants, for whom there was no local target and little political movement in which to direct their discontent. The most tragic single result of this situation was the murder of a dedicated lay advocate and miner's widow, Anise Floyd, by a frustrated black lung claimant whom she was representing. Ms. Floyd's closest friend and fellow lay advocate, Helen Powell, wrote a eulogy to her which said in part:

Her death came at the hands of a man who was her friend, who she had helped. Sick and deranged though his actions were, we cannot dismiss his actions as simply those of a lunatic. This man has worked all his life and had little to show for it except a crumbling body and a frustrated spirit. He had been waiting month after month for more than two years for any word whatsoever on his Department of Labor black lung claim.

We who work with claimants know all too well the frustration that develops watching the mailbox day after day, week after week, for word about a decision that can mean all the difference between a little comfort at the end of life and continuing poverty.

We know the rage that develops in people whose fate will be decided by laws and regulations so complex and arbitrary they have no way of comprehending them.22

Their exclusive focus on compensation also left the Black Lung Associations without an active following among working miners. As the industry expanded after two decades of contraction, the median age of the work force fell rapidly. For this younger generation, caught up in protracted wildcat strikes and the turbulent aftermath of the MFD election victory, black lung compensation was not a pressing personal issue. As a result of these trends, the social base and political vitality of the movement diminished drastically.

The relationship between the black lung chapters and the reform leadership of the
UMWA was a source of serious dissension among activists. Disagreement erupted over whether the Black Lung Associations should rely on the UMWA for leadership, financial support, and organizational expertise, or whether they should maintain an independent, possibly critical stance toward the union leadership. Splits developed within the movement between favored UMWA members and those with less access to the new leadership—such as widows who were not union members.

Underlying the personal rivalries and squabbles that inevitably arose in this period, there were often differences over the political role of the BLAs. Trained in the Byzantine complexity of the federal black lung laws and regulations, many lay advocates saw the chapters' role as claims assistance and political lobbying. Others believed that the movement's exclusive focus on compensation should be shifted to include workplace prevention of black lung, and that the social base should be expanded to encompass working miners. Their efforts to change the course of the movement came too late, however; only a handful of activists remained. By the mid-to-late seventies, a decade after its birth, the black lung movement was no longer a political force in the coalfields.

Due largely to lobbying by the UMWA, in 1977 Congress enacted additional black lung legislation to ease claims eligibility. A companion bill, which won support from fiscal conservatives, shifted the financial burden for benefits from the taxpayer to the coal industry. Once

*Douglas Yarrow; Meeting near Sophia, West Virginia, 1977.*

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again, thousands of claims were awarded. However, more recent legislation severely restricts eligibility on the ground that most previous awards are medically indefensible and that dust levels are sufficiently low to prevent black lung. Despite an initial UMWA-sponsored demonstration against these changes, the union now appears to have accepted them. Many miners would dispute this capitulation, but today there is no movement to give them a voice.

Conclusion

The black lung movement has gone down in history as a successful effort to force the recognition of an occupational disease and obtain compensation for its victims. It did of course accomplish these reforms. But the history presented in this article suggests that defining the movement solely by the legislation that it achieved ignores its historical course and context, and thereby drastically narrows its meaning. Viewed within the panorama of changes in the postwar coal fields, this struggle acquires a broader and more complex significance.

The black lung movement was born out of twenty years of peaceful cooperation between the UMWA and the coal industry—years of impoverishment, high unemployment, disintegration of communities, and profound changes in the coal mine workplace. The tremendous militancy of the black lung strike and march on the legislature originated in and challenged this history. It signalled the end of rank-and-file quiescence, and inaugurated a decade in which miners, the union, and the industry struggled to define the new terms of industrial relations in coal.

When the movement first arose, the phrase “black lung” connoted much more than an occupational respiratory disease and the suffering inflicted on its victims. Black lung symbolized the shared hardships of this period: unemployment, poverty, denial of a pension, as well as occupational disability. At the rallies through which the movement was organized, men and women gave testimonials about the financial, physical, and social injustices they had personally endured. Their growing demand for black lung compensation represented a claim to retribution from the industry for the human price of its economic transformation.

Yet once activists entered the legislative arena, the goals of their movement were gradually and in important ways redefined; their control over the meaning and momentum of their movement was circumscribed. Translating the demand for compensation into a form compatible with existing programs and legislative protocol required reliance on legal and scientific experts, whose technical knowledge defined black lung very differently from activists’ experiential and historical understanding. To its victims, black lung was a political metaphor as well as a visible, pervasive disease: virtually all miners of the older generation had some evidence of lung impairment. Their symptoms of lung disease were badges of membership in a community of people who had worked their lives away in the mines; they were evidence of collective entitlement to redress.

From the scientific medical viewpoint, however, “black lung” was simply a loose, lay term for a specific clinical entity, coal workers’ pneumoconiosis (CWP). According to the dominant medical perspective, entitlement to compensation had little to do with patients’ “subjective” physical self-evaluation, much less participation in the history that produced the disease; eligibility must be established through individual diagnoses of CWP, considered disabling only in its most advanced (and by far most rare) stages. By this definition, only
3-5 percent of the workforce was genuinely disabled by black lung, which of course dramatically minimized the problem of occupational lung disease. Thus, what activists considered a pervasive, collective historical experience, the medical profession defined as relatively rare and individual "cases."

Participants in the movement also tended to see black lung as economic in origin. They viewed themselves as victims of a profoundly unequal and unfair transaction: a lifetime of productive labor, in exchange for which the operators had robbed their health and, in many cases, left them with no pension. Many of the common phrases used to describe black lung express this sentiment of having been physically exploited—"used up," "wore out," "broke down." Activists blamed the coal industry for placing profit above human life and hoped that the cost of compensation would force the operators to reduce dust levels and prevent the disease. But the workers' compensation system through which they initially hoped to realize this goal in fact undermined any incentive for prevention. Workers' compensation evolved historically as a mechanism not for encouraging prevention of occupational hazards, but for shielding industry from potentially bankrupting damage claims. Through predictable insurance premiums, compensation rationalized the cost of occupational disease and accidents. Workers who file claims ordinarily forsake their right to sue for damages; the system thereby places a tolerable cap on corporate liability. Thus the righteous retribution that activists sought from industry for "destroying their health" became, through the workers' compensation system, an economic calculation. What they hoped would be a financially unbearable incentive for prevention became quite the opposite: an insurable expense. Black lung disease became—for industry—another cost of doing business.

The point is that the broad, in some cases implicitly radical, impulses that originally infused the black lung movement were slowly reconstituted in a form compatible with existing programs and relations of power. The political process through which activists sought to realize their goals redefined not only what constituted adequate redress for their grievances, but even the grievances themselves. This did not occur simply through the political compromises reached in legislative chambers or back rooms, although at certain points these were important; it was a gradual, subtle process of transformation in the very meaning and purpose of the movement itself.

Thus there occurred a gradual redefinition of "black lung" even within the culture of the region. Today, this phrase no longer conjures up the images of shared hardship and a collective demand for retribution; "black lung" now connotes federal benefits. "Have you gotten your black lung yet?" is a hopeful question, ironic or even grisly as that may seem to those unfamiliar with the region. Even to its victims, "black lung" now means compensation.

Yet even as their movement became more and more narrowly defined by the federal compensation program (and their efforts to reform it), for several years activists retained a political vitality and unity based on their common experience of black lung and their belief in collective entitlement to benefits. They did not capitulate to the ideological tyranny of scientific medicine, which claimed exclusive right to the definition of black lung (and all other diseases), and to the determination of compensation eligibility. Participants found early on that reliance on sympathetic physicians and scientists to "outprove" those of industry was a fruitless strategy. They found that even the formal victory of medical and legal recognition of black lung was meaningless—in terms of preventive
action or compensation awards—unless they persisted in enforcing their own understanding of the disease. The interests invested in conflicting approaches to black lung consistently decided through their ongoing political struggle which point of view prevailed. Thus, their dogged pursuit of more liberal eligibility standards for compensation drew activists into a protracted struggle over who would control the definition of disease (physicians or its victims) and who would control this federal program (bureaucrats or its constituents).

Herein lie the greatest losses of this movement for other occupational safety and health advocates: virtually all aspects of occupational diseases—their recognition, definition, the determination of compensation eligibility, and the practice of prevention—are ultimately political, not medical, legal, or technical tasks. Black lung activists discovered that even the passage of desired legislation, although defined as a victory in our political culture, was largely symbolic and did not automatically bring the intended reforms. They found that it was not legislation per se, but their own continuous political presence and pressure that yielded substantive results.

Conversely, the experiences of the movement

Douglas Yarrow, Charleston Rally, 1969.
suggest that one weakness of many occupational health and safety efforts may be the tendency to rely on medical opinions and technical or legal solutions to essentially a political problem. In the seemingly desperate need to defend past victories against the current political reaction, there is a tendency to ignore this lesson: the resolution of occupational hazards ultimately does not lie with OSHA, NIOSH, or their scientific experts; it lies in the workplace, where occupational danger originates, in the hands of workers themselves. Those who would serve the movements for occupational safety and health with their professional expertise must be acutely sensitive to this political reality. To forget it is to disarm those who must bear the consequences of occupational hazards, and in whose power lies the only hope for their elimination.

Footnotes

1. Some of the most important struggles in US labor history involved "occupational health and safety," if this phrase is construed broadly to mean workers' mental and physical wellbeing on the job. For example, the movement to reduce the work day to eight hours may be seen in this sense as an effort to defend workers' occupational health. However, the first time that occupational disease per se became the focus of a mass movement was in the black lung struggle.

Douglas Yarrow, 1969.


5. Author's interview with retired coal miner, Logan County, W.V., September 7, 1978.


8. Author's interview with black lung activist, Raleigh County, W.V., September 26, 1978.


10. Author's interview with black lung activist and miner's wife, Kanawha County, W.V., October 4, 1978.

11. Author's interview with black lung activist and disabled miner's wife, Fayette County, W.V., July 26, 1978.


20. Author's interview with black lung activist, Monongalia County, W.V., October 11, 1978. Joseph A. Yablonski, Boyle's challenger in the 1969 UMWA election, was murdered along with his wife and daughter at the behest of Tony Boyle.

21. Author's interview with black lung activist, Kanawha County, W.V., October 8, 1978.

22. Helen Powell, "In Memory and Honor: Anise Floyd," *Mountain Life and Work*, June 1978, p. 33. Both women are black, and were leaders during the later phases of the black lung movement.

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