

Pittsburgh Youth Promote Environmental Justice

By Anissa Tanweer and Youth Policy Institute students

Do youth care about their communities? Can youth affect policy? Are youth changing the world? Students involved with the Youth Policy Institute say yes, yes, and yes!

Youth Policy Institute is a program of the Pittsburgh Transportation Equity Project, an organization whose mission is to engage, educate, and empower African American residents, groups, community and faith-based leaders to become advocates for transportation policy, equity issues, and regional planning.

Every year, over the course of four months, students participate in weekly workshops led by local and national experts in the fields of politics, social activism, and environmental justice. These weekly

sessions cover topics ranging from “How a Bill Becomes Law” and “How to Lobby Your Legislators” to “The Disparate Impact of Global Climate Change.” During the summer months, we also participate in community engagement projects. Each project involves conducting thorough research, developing a creative mechanism for passing this information on to the community, and publicly presenting our work.

The Youth Policy Institute Class of 2005 worked on two different projects: dirty diesel exhaust and a community festival to promote and celebrate environ-



Photo: Youth Policy Institute students make biodiesel. © 2005 PTEP.



mental justice. Both tracks had a special emphasis on global climate change and environmental justice.

The U.S. government defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” But we found that the movement sees environmental justice as much more than that. Community struggles for healthy living conditions in places like Altgeld Gardens in Chicago (Toxic Doughnut), Cancer Alley in Louisiana, and Mount Dioxin in Pensacola, Florida, are examples of environmental justice in action.

Dirty Diesel Project

For our first step we researched the environmental and health impacts of diesel exhaust. We found that diesel exposure is linked to cancer, asthma, and cardiovascular disease, and that diesel exhaust contains high levels of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that causes global warming. We examined global warming effects on low-income populations and people of color, due to droughts, flooding, severe hurricanes, and even disease epidemics.

In studying the history of the diesel engine, we learned that Rudolph Diesel, originally designed it to run on peanut oil. Modern diesel engines can be modified to run on vegetable oil—even oil already used to cook French fries! Further, we found that vegetable oil can easily be refined into biodiesel, a renewable and cleaner-burning fuel that can be used in any diesel vehicle without making modifications to the engine.

With the assistance of local biodiesel experts Greg Boulos and Nathaniel Doyno, we took recycled vegetable oil from a local restaurant, added the correct amount of lye and methanol, and then blended it all together. Voila! With a little elbow grease, we went from greasy French fry oil to several batches of biodiesel that could be used in any diesel engine!

Why bother? Because biodiesel contains less toxic particles than petroleum-based diesel, so it’s not as bad for human health. Moreover, while biodiesel still emits carbon dioxide, it is carbon that already exists in the global carbon cycle, rather than carbon that has been trapped below ground in fossil fuels for millions of years. Therefore, biodiesel isn’t increasing the total amount of carbon circulating in the global carbon cycle.

Just Jam 4 Justice

In order to pass our newfound information along to the community, we made a CD mix of popular dance music. We printed facts about diesel exhaust in the CD liner and distributed it out for free at “Just Jam 4 Justice” festival, the other half of this year’s Youth Policy Institute project.

More than 100 residents from the immediate and surrounding communities attended the September 17, 2005 event. To make it happen, we secured the use of a green city lot on which to hold the festival, solicited food and prize donations, recruited local hip-hop and spoken word artists, and lined up speakers from organizations that deal with environmental health issues. The keynote address was delivered by Ms. Ayanna King, founder and former executive director of Pittsburgh Transportation Equity Project, who is now director of the Office of Environmental Advocate at the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

In addition to featuring music performers, and guest speakers from environmental health and justice organizations, we delivered presentations on the impact of global warming on low-income populations and communities of color throughout the world. We paid particular attention to the increasing frequency of severe storms and the disproportionate impact on those who cannot afford to escape their fury, from the South Pacific to New Orleans. ■

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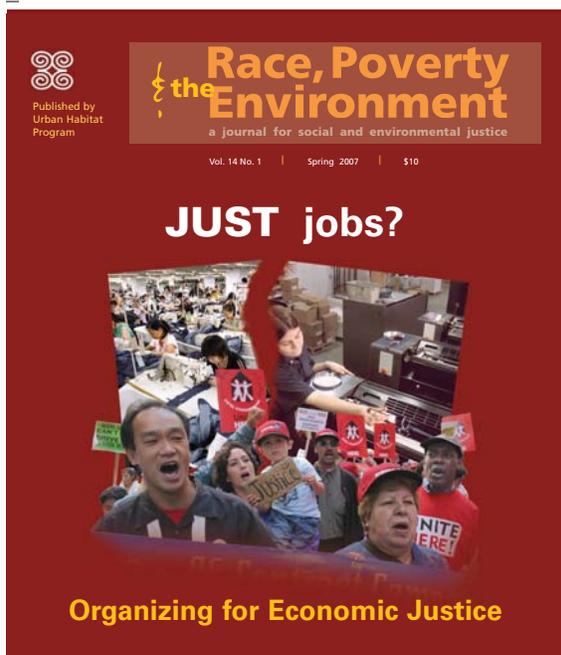
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