

Want Environmental Justice? Fire Your Boss.

by Omar Freilla

A promise that corporations always make when they are trying to site a polluting facility is that it will bring jobs to that community. The number of low-income communities that bought into that argument and watched their neighborhoods turn into dumping grounds for power plants, refineries, and waste disposal businesses are too numerous to count. Their experience shows that few of the jobs promised by polluters ever materialize. What's more, even fewer go to local residents. When community members do get jobs at these facilities, they usually are the most dangerous, or temporary, with no benefits. Unfortunately, as long as our communities remain desperate for work, they will remain prime targets for this bait-and-switch technique. The desperation is a result of the exodus of blue-collar manufacturing jobs from the United States in the past decades. While the mainstream environmental movement has historically been bogged down in the "jobs vs. environment" debate, the environmental justice movement has clearly defined its support for job creation in our communities: Yes, we want jobs; just not jobs that kill us!

Creating Work Where There Was None

In response to growing environmental awareness, the past few decades have also seen the development of greener ways of doing things. Innovations in energy production and building techniques have created new opportunities to phase out practices that wreaked havoc on the planet, especially on the low-income communities of color, which have always borne the brunt of pollution. These innovations could potentially lead to the creation of new jobs on a large enough scale for the people who need them the most. According to the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, for every one job in waste disposal, the recycling, manufacturing from recyclables, and reuse industries, have the potential to generate 10 to 250 jobs. These jobs cut across traditional blue-collar/white-collar distinctions, and have come to be known as "green-collar" jobs.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these jobs would automatically go to those who most need them, or that communities that have borne the greatest burden of pollution would actually benefit from the latest eco-innovations and green businesses. In truth, new employment sectors are typically

developed by those with access to capital, and filled by those with appropriate skills and connections. Thus, communities with insufficient capital, skilled labor, and connections, will end up being the last to benefit, if at all. If history is to be our guide, without early intervention, profits generated by green businesses will primarily enrich the predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle class communities that own them.

Blazing A Green Job Trail of our Own

The South Bronx, with one of the highest unemployment rates in all of New York City—upwards of 27% in some areas—is just one of many places in the U.S. hit by de-industrialization. So, a little less than three years ago, we decided to create our own green businesses, owned and operated by the workers, and capable of improving environmental conditions in the South Bronx. We believe that getting to the root of environmental racism and economic inequality requires new economic structures that promote environmental protection, demand accountability to local communities, and empower workers.

We did not have to look far for ideas. As with

many other dumping grounds, one of the big issues facing the South Bronx is waste. New York City produces approximately 50,000 tons of trash each day. Approximately 37% of that moves through waste transfer stations in the South Bronx, before being exported to distant landfills and incinerators—which also happen to be in low-income and communities of color. Much of that waste, about 13,500 tons a day, is made up of building materials, such as kitchen cabinets, doors, sinks, and hardwood floors that are smashed to bits by a demolition crew and run over by a tractor. Waste disposal not being labor intensive, the only “benefit” we receive from these companies is the exhaust from their diesel trucks. As an alternative to this senseless waste, we decided to focus on incubating a retail warehouse for salvaged and surplus building materials that could be reused. While there are hundreds of similar reuse stores across the country, each creating wealth from what most still treat as waste, our store will be the first worker cooperative when it opens in 2007.

Worker Co-ops: Alien, Yet Alluring

For most people in the U.S., the idea of workers owning and managing their workplace is a completely alien concept. Most of us have learned to accept that a worker's place is to serve at the whim of their employer; that workers can never be owners; and that workers are innately inferior beings incapable of governing themselves. Despite these common assumptions, however, we are attracted to the worker co-op model as a means of taking control of our local economy and environment. Here are some reasons why:

- (1) Worker co-ops retain more wealth in their communities. Unlike companies with remote shareholders and non-locally owned businesses, co-op owners are more likely to live near where they work. As a result, more of a worker co-op's profits circulate within the community for longer periods of time.
- (2) Barring a major catastrophe, people rarely pick up and move en masse. So, worker co-ops are not likely to relocate to another town, state, or country.

- (3) Worker co-op owners live in their communities, hence are more accountable to their communities and not inclined to pollute them. As the environmental justice movement has long pointed out, if a business is truly green, its owners ought to be comfortable putting it in their own backyard.
- (4) Worker cooperatives teach democracy. Despite the rhetoric, few people in this country can say that they truly experience democracy in their daily lives. How can we expect accountability from our elected officials, or demand a voice in government, when we don't even have a voice at our workplace where we spend most of our time?

The Solution from Inside Out

Since its beginnings, the environmental justice movement has been about people taking control of their own communities—ensuring that those most impacted by a problem are also the ones leading the hunt for a solution. We need to think along similar lines when we enter into discussions about job creation and economic development. Instead of assuming the position of supplicants, we ought to develop our own job creation strategies that embody the movement's principles of community control and self-determination. If we fail to do this, we enable the continuation of the same patterns of exploitation for generations to come.

Worker co-ops have achieved substantial successes in other parts of the world. Most notable are the Mondragon Cooperatives in the Basque region of northern Spain, and the co-ops of the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. In recent years, laid-off workers in Argentina have taken over scores of defunct factories all over the country. In the U.S., there is a small but growing movement of worker cooperatives that is being united by the newly formed U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives. If you are interested in learning more or are interested in attending the Federation's Second National Worker Co-op Conference this October (13-15) in New York City, visit <http://www.usworker.coop>.

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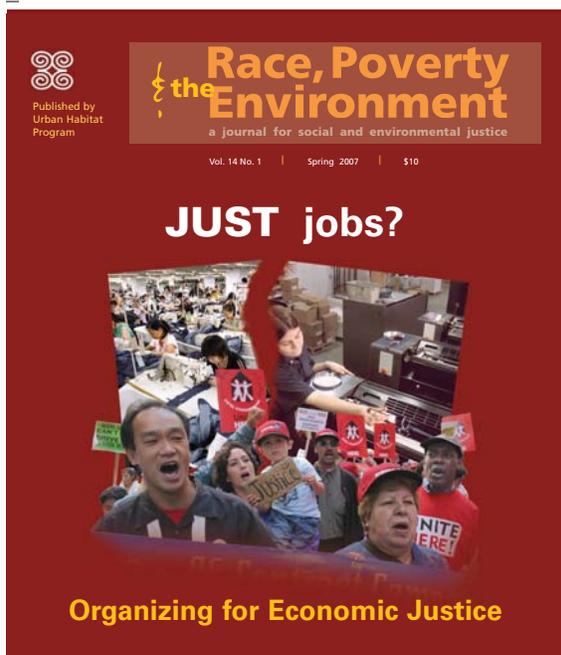
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