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Building Community

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A Special RPE Reportback on the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, Washington, DC, October 24-27, 1991

The Summit

Building Community

by Baldemar Velasquez

Baldemar Velasquez is the president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Ohio. The following is an edited transcript of his speech to the delegates at the Summit...

When I was a boy, I worked in the cotton fields. I remember the first time I got out there with my grandfather, smelling the sweat mixed with the cotton and the soil. He gave me a big bag to put the cotton in. I got out there and I began putting all that cotton into that bag. Well pretty soon, the other workers were all way ahead of me. And pretty soon my bag got bigger and fuller, and, because I was so little, I couldn't drag that bag anymore. Those bags weigh well over 100 pounds when they're full. I couldn't drag it anymore and I was left behind.

I wasted my whole morning with things going through my head like "I can't do the things I wanted to do by coming out here." You know what I really wanted to do? In the labor camp (we were being housed in an old abandoned school house — we were some of the first homeless people, and they put us in anything they found), in that camp we had a little tradition among the crew that whoever felt they did very well in the picking

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Transforming a Movement

by Dana Alston

Dana Alston of the Panos Institute was a member of the Summit planning committee. Here is her reportback...

Rarely do people get the opportunity to participate in historic events. But each of the 300 African, Latino, Native and Asian Americans from all 50 states who gathered for the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in late October must have left with a sense that the atmosphere in which environmental issues are debated and resolved is changed for good. And for the better.

Joined by delegates from Puerto Rico, Canada, Central and South America, and the Marshall Islands, those present at the October 24-27 meeting in Washington, DC set in a motion a process of redefining environmental issues in their own terms.

People of color gathered not in reaction to the environmental movement, but rather to reaffirm their traditional connection to and respect for the natural world, and to speak for themselves on some of the most critical issues of our times.

For people of color, the environment is woven into an overall framework and understanding of social, racial and economic justice. The definitions that emerge from the environmental justice move-

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"Come Sunday morning, there's going to be a new environmental movement!"

**- The Rev. Ben Chavis,
kicking off the Summit, October 24, 1991**

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for that day, they would buy pop or soft drinks for the whole crew. I said, "I want to buy the soft drinks. I want to make good money -- work good today so that I can buy soft drinks for the whole crew." It was the mark of a full-fledged worker. I wanted to be a worker, I wanted to be part of this

sharecropping. You know, when they freed the slaves, the plantation owners had to figure out a way to keep the slaves on the plantations and not call them slaves. So they called them "sharecroppers." And so, today, the modern day agricultural establishment has taken that old system and brought it to the farmworkers of Northwest Ohio.

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community. So as I was doing work in the field, that was my job. My job wasn't picking cotton, my job was making community. Because that's what nourishes us — that's what makes life.

While I was out in that field — I was stuck out in that field — I got up and I waved my arms and my aunt Amalia came to my rescue. A little short woman. She picked up that bag, took it to the scales, weighed it in, and stuck beside me the rest of the day. But that night we went home, and she told me "Come over here and bring me your bag." She cut it in half and sewed the end. So I could no longer fill that bag beyond my ability to drag it out of the field. She helped me do my job. She helped me be part of that community. The next day I didn't waste a whole lot of time being stuck out in the field, and I was able to buy soft drinks for the whole crew.

In Ohio, we had a different problem making community. There we experienced one of the archaic economic institutions that have been around since the days of the Civil War. We call

We're technically sharecroppers in Ohio. And I'll tell you what the scam is: if you're a sharecropper, you're an "independent contractor" and you're self-employed — you are not employed by the company. Now, the few laws that exist to protect farmworkers don't apply to independent contractors. Like the Fair Labor Standards Act, or any of the other laws that apply to "employees." And the companies and the agricultural industry save their share of the Social Security, they don't have to pay workers' compensation, they don't have to pay unemployment compensation. They are taking food out of the people's mouths. And they can do with us what they want, because we're "independent contractors."

So we tried to hold them accountable. The growers, now these are small family farmers — the guys that Willie Nelson sings for all the time. The rednecks that exploited our people. They grow mostly corn, wheat and soybeans. But pickles and tomatoes are a good cash crop. And they get a return on that investment to help them balance out the farm economy, the bad prices

they don't get on their corn, wheat or soybeans. So off the sweat of our backs we are contributing a major factor to saving the family farm. But then the family farmer would tell us, "Well I can't pay you any more money because I've got a contract with Campbell Soup. I've got a contract with Vlasic Pickles and this is what they pay for so many pounds of pickles. They have to give us more so we can give you more."

So we go to the company, and the company tells us "We're not the employer. Go back to the farmer. He's the one you work for." Now, it don't take a fool to figure out that if you're going to negotiate an agreement to help the people out there (remember about *community*, help them form *community*) that you have to talk to all of them. Because they all make the decisions that affect my life personally. I don't care if they're not the employer. In our case, nobody is the employer, because we are "independent contractors."

So in 1978, after they would not listen to us, we said "we will drop our tomato hampers and walk out of the fields." We walked out of the fields and stayed out of the fields for eight years. That's how long that strike lasted. I can't count the number of people that were arrested. Our attorney, an Irish fellow from Cleveland, came down. The sheriff very promptly tried to arrest him on a traffic violation, take him into custody. Beat him up in front of over 50 witnesses, sat on top of him banging his head on a pavement. He suffered cranial nerve damage. To this day that lawyer is disabled.

(When the sheriff couldn't break the strike, they brought in the Ku Klux Klan of Northwest Ohio. They burned crosses in front of our field headquarters. They shot the glass out of the windows of our field office.)

Our major demand was we wanted a three-party collective bargaining agreement, with the workers, the farmers and the company. So we launched a boycott of Campbell's Soup, which many of you participated in. We were told by the experts, the legal

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experts, that it couldn't be done. The leadership of America's unions told us we couldn't get done what we were asking because Campbell's Soup would never sign an agreement with a group of people who were not their employees.

There was nothing in history that said that it could be done. But there was another organizer that we learned from — Jesse Jackson talked about him last night — another labor organizer, and his name was Moses. God didn't call him out of the fields in south Texas, he called him out of the desert in Sinai and said, "Moses, I want you to go back to Egypt and I want you to unionize all those bricklayers over there." And Moses said, "but God, I can't do that. I can't speak, I can't do nothing." God said, "Well, just go."

When Moses went back over there to Egypt and started organizing those people, he went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go." Well, Pharaoh came up with all kinds of excuses, there was some debate. And it reminded me what all those labor officials were telling me, "Baldemar that cannot be done." Well no sooner had Moses led the people out of Egypt after God got done with Pharaoh, than the people started complaining and whining right away. "Why did you take us out of there?" No sooner had they got out there than they saw Pharaoh with his chariots following them and they were trapped against the Red Sea. And you know what happened there? God saved them again. No sooner had they crossed the other side than they got to the episode of the snakes. Moses yelled at God and God said, "Keep your eyes high and don't look down at the snakes." So when these folks are telling me "Baldemar that can't be done," I heard the message: don't look down at the snakes.

We were able to do the boycott with the help of many good friends at the National Council of Churches, and many communities of color throughout the United States — that was where our support was. It didn't come from the big unions. It didn't come from the

major organized establishments. It didn't come from the great established white organizations, however liberal they might have been. They asked me to speak afterwards at some of these conferences and I always remind them that they missed the boat.

But enough pressure was brought on Campbell's Soup that in 1986 they did what they said they'd never do: they signed a three party collective bargaining agreement. I'll never forget the day we signed that agreement. Because we had great numbers of heated discussions when they saw the writing on the wall. One of our folks happened to be in the bathroom when the other side all walked in there together, complaining to each other because the last item on the table was you have to sign the agreement and you have to bring your growers in an organized fashion to sign it as a unit. And a guy from the company says, "we spent all these years keeping these growers from organizing against us, now we got to organize them to please these so-and-so Mexicans."

politician I spent time working for was Jesse Jackson, because he wasn't a politician.) This commission is our response to collective bargaining legislation. Because we're not going to get laws that are going to protect us in the established political system in this country right now as it is. Understand who it is that's running the country.

Now let's make no mistake about this. When I went to a shareholder meeting of the Campbell's Soup company during the boycott campaign, it shocked me to see who was running Campbell Soup. It wasn't a family operation — it was some of the world's biggest financial outfits. JP Morgan, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Financial Insurance Company, the Philadelphia National Bank, they all sat up there in their light blue suits like somebody cloned them, made from the same stuff. Ford Motor Company, you name it. I said, what do all these people have to do with tomatoes?

It was the beginning of my education about what it was that we were fighting.

I went to a shareholder meeting of the Campbell's Soup company during the boycott campaign, it shocked me to see who was running Campbell Soup. It wasn't a family operation — it was some of the world's biggest financial outfits. . .

We weren't fighting a tomato war, we were fighting a financial war.

The next day they signed that agreement -- three parties. We didn't stop at getting the agreement signed until we had them recognize this independent commission that we had formed to mediate the negotiations. (Now this goes with my point about legislation and politicians — which I'm sorry to say I never got too excited about. I find it very difficult to get excited about politicians. The only

We weren't fighting a tomato war, we were fighting a financial war. So when we negotiated this agreement, we said, we have to change our focus as to what it is that we're really fighting, what it is we're really organizing. Because the same people who were running Campbell's Soup were also trying to stop other movements of people of color.

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We did this campaign with Campbell's because of that revelation. We found out that the Philadelphia National Bank, to give you one example, held 2.2 million shares of stock in the Campbell Soup company, held it in trust for one of the board's family members who is one of the major stockholders of the Campbell Soup company. The president of Campbell

American. And that's alright. We went down there and I was ready to answer two questions: What do you want? and, What's in it for you? My answer was, we want your people to have a better contract with Campbell's Soup, and what's in it for us is that it's going to put us in a better negotiating position with Campbell's Soup up north. Because frankly they're telling us that you guys work too cheap. So if you

northeast Ohio and Southeast Michigan. Last week we signed the whole kit and caboodle.

Dean Foods signed the agreement and it will be announced in a couple of weeks. With Campbell's we had a three-party agreement. With Dean Foods we had a five-party collective bargaining agreement. We had them all at the table, all signing one agreement. They all made the decisions that impact our lives. And we should insist on talking with those people and creating these kinds of agreements, whether they're our employers or not. That doesn't matter. You use the power of the people and do a boycott and do what you have to do to get them to the table, and once you get them to the table, ask them for everything. Because everything they have we had a hand in making.

Vlasic and Dean's have the two biggest market shares of pickles in North America, and they grow pickles in three states and in Mexico. So we signed an agreement with the sister union in Mexico calling for an agricultural commission to oversee the organization of the negotiations of workers who work for the company in both countries. The reason for that is we are less and less the citizens of the country in which we are born and more and more the citizens of the company for whom we work. And as long as they can divide us country by country, they're going to use us against each other.

Let's get this straight about citizenship: I didn't have any say where they put that border. There's no debate in my heart as to what is Mexico and what is the U.S.A. Go back to the beginning: there were other people in the world who did this same sort of thing when they encountered the Native American people of this country. Now Hitler did something like that. And if you read our history books, they called it a "vicious dictatorship." The Japanese did something like that, and our history books called it "imperialism." Now when they came to the U.S.A. they

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We are less and less the citizens of the country in which we are born and more and more the citizens of the company for whom we work. And as long as they can divide us country by country, they're going to use us against each other.

sat on the board of the Philadelphia National Bank. And we saw how they invested in the oppression of other people of color as well. They are a major seller of krugerrands from South Africa. So we made an alliance with the anti-apartheid movement because we're fighting the same people. We began to see a pattern in how this industry is organized, and in their investments in other parts of the country.

And no sooner had we signed this agreement than we were told that we made it too expensive to harvest tomatoes in Ohio and Michigan and they'd just bring more from Mexico. So I turned to my co-conspirator, and I said, "Fernando, we have to go to Mexico. Down there they talk our language." So we went to Mexico. We found out where the Campbell Soup tomatoes were being grown. We realized that we had to answer some questions going down there because those brothers down there are naturally going to be suspicious of any North

work too cheap, don't work too cheap. Ask them for more. We'll be on your side asking for more.

Within a year and a half, they negotiated the best agreement that they had ever negotiated in the history of the union: 15 percent over Mexico government senior wages. So when it came to be our turn to negotiate our contract with Campbell's again, we didn't hear a word about Mexico. But it's the same financial investors in Mexico as it was up here.

We've been trying to unify and organize the entire pickle industry in Ohio. We signed Vlasic pickles, we signed Heinz, and the only company outside the bargaining was Dean Foods. Now they're a mammoth corporation. Dean's owns Kate's Pickles, based in North Carolina, and they own Green Bay Foods based in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Green Bay Foods operates two grain stations in northeast Ohio that contract with 35 growers in Ohio and Michigan. They also own MJ Pickles that contracts with about 25 growers in

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called it "manifest destiny."

Now make no mistake what the real ambition is. You see, it was always about the investment of money, and slowly capturing the land so they can use it and abuse it. And use the people of color to do the dirty work. Why do you think our foreign policy is one of propping up favorable dictators from Mexico south to Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Caribbean? They would create safe haven for the investment of dollars to rape the land, to rape the people, so they can bring that money back into their coffers. Who do you think they are? They're the same financial centers that sit on the board of Campbell Soup. They sit on the same boards of the multinational corporations. Because to them, that's the vehicle that they use to put money in and get money out.

Baldemar Velasquez is the president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Toledo, Ohio.

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backs on requests for assistance from domestic, non-white communities struggling with pollution as devastating as any on the planet. Ms. Alston spoke directly to mainstream representatives at the Summit about many of the key issues that brought us to Washington, D.C. The affirmation of her courage to speak out echoed through the audience: "It takes a woman!"

In this society and culture, language is one of the tools we use to convey our symbols and beliefs. During the march on the Capitol to protest the proposed drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, delegates demonstrated solidarity

with our Native American relations. Using the language of this society, we delegates were greeted with the cry, "Welcome friends, welcome brothers!" The use of language should be inclusive of all participants in this movement. Language is one method of relaying the thought, care and respect we feel for each other.

The community-led environmental justice movement is uniquely positioned to redefine the environmental agenda. It must be ready to recognize the degree to which women (particularly women of color) have been instrumental to its progress, and are key to its continued growth and success.

Peace & Environmental Groups Challenge Uranium Plan

Tri-Valley CARES, a Livermore, California-based peace and environmental group, along with attorneys from the Western States Legal Foundation, will sue the Department of Energy in Federal Court this month over the operation of a full scale demonstration plant to enrich uranium at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The Lab would like to undertake this project without public disclosure, public hearings, or comprehensive environmental review. The project, called Uranium-Atomic Vapor Isotope Separation (U-AVLIS), proposes to superheat and vaporize uranium ore, shooting specially tuned laser beams through the vapor cloud to selectively ionize out (enrich) the fissile U-235 isotope from the bulk of the uranium ore. U-235 is useable in nuclear power plants and, when highly enriched, in nuclear bombs.

The project poses risks from accidents, spills, leaks, fires, etc — Livermore Lab is already a Superfund site. It will produce massive amounts of toxic and radioactive waste, will emit freon, TCE and

uranium particles into the air, *and* is a nuclear proliferation nightmare. The Department of Energy has already announced plans to sell (push) this enriched uranium to foreign countries. And, once the bugs are worked out here in Livermore, the laser technology itself will become attractive to countries that want to produce nuclear bombs, because it is compact, uses less energy than other bomb-production techniques, and is hard to detect.

Additionally, the basic AVLIS process can be used to enrich plutonium, too. In 1989, Tri-Valley CARES and Western States Legal Foundation were involved in a successful effort to stop Livermore Lab from operating a similar demonstration plant to enrich plutonium.

The lawsuit will demand that an Environmental Impact Statement be prepared, and that the public hearings be held *before* this project continues full speed ahead. We are interested in working with other groups on this important issue. Contact Tri-Valley CARES at 510/443-7148 for more details.