

Learning from Our Past

EJ's strengths and missed opportunities

BY SOFIA MARTINEZ

“We speak for ourselves” has long been the mantra that brought people together in the Environmental Justice Movement. It’s a very grassroots phrase that reflects the fact that EJ has been a community-based movement led by people of color. It also illustrates an important lesson from the social justice struggles of the 60s, which were also grounded in the grassroots. But looking at other movements and my own involvement in the organizations I have worked with and helped create over the last 20 years, it seems there are key lessons we haven’t yet learned from those earlier campaigns. The EJ Movement faces a time of great opportunity and great challenge, and the solidarity among people of color and commitment to the grassroots are being tested now.

Unlearned Lessons: Sexism and Racism

Sexism continues to be an issue in environmental justice. It has impacts on leadership, how issues are defined, what strategies are used, who gets heard and who gets seen. On the one hand, women have always been quite present in the movement, as in all movements, and probably in much larger numbers than men. Women are also in leadership positions and they receive recognition. However, it’s often a shallow, manipulative, and disingenuous kind of recognition. Making matters worse, some of the women leaders don’t want to deal with gender issues because they feel it creates division. They don’t challenge sexism the way they might challenge race or class issues. There have been strides but within organizations, people really need to look at gender more seriously. Young women are challenging sexism but it’s going to continue to be a long struggle.

In terms of race, the commitment to people of color leadership and voices has been one of the most powerful aspects of

the EJ Movement. But there is still a tendency to view issues in black-and-white terms. I think it’s very important that people of color come together to learn about each other, struggle with each other and build strong alliances based on our common status in this society. Before we assume that we can make allies with white folks, sometimes, there are a lot of levels of work that we as people of color have to do internally and with each other.

Betita Martinez of the Institute for Multiracial Justice talks about “oppression olympics” in her recent book *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century*. She writes about how we need to overcome the temptation to say things like, “I’m more oppressed because I’m Indian” or “because my people were enslaved.” We get into that a lot in EJ and I’ve definitely been guilty of it. But just because you’re a person of color or poor doesn’t make you right and manipulation has to be called for what it is. We all have our own internalized stuff and we really need to challenge ourselves so we can more effectively challenge white supremacy.

Confronting Class

During the Civil Rights Movement and the liberation and ethnic/racial movements of the 60s and 70s, activists struggled with similar divide-and-conquer issues. A lot of class conflicts arose because people of color—African-Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos/Mexicans—have been in this country for many generations and we’ve all been trained and conditioned to aspire to materialistic middle class values and individual success. These contradictions continue with us today in slightly different forms.

If we look back at the two People of Color Environmental Leadership Summits, class issues become apparent. Twelve years ago, we went to Washington D.C. to launch this movement nationally.

Rev. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. spoke about environmental racism and the term came into more common use. Dana Alston, now deceased, spoke the famous words, “We speak for ourselves,” which was a direct challenge to the group of mainstream environmental organizations and others. There was a collective demonstration. About 500 people were expected but more than 800 people actually attended. It was an exciting time.

At the second Summit, however, I felt that the movement had been institutionalized. Former President Clinton’s Executive Order has been helpful. However, it started a whole process of institutionalization within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA is currently piloting an EJ curriculum, the “official knowledge” of EJ, according to the EPA. There is now a wealth of literature about EJ as well as numerous programs at universities. The story and the history of EJ are being written and institutionalized, creating the official knowledge and history of the movement. But the grassroots don’t have access to publishing.

Grassroots Focus

The EJ Movement must focus on the grassroots because they/we are the most disenfranchised. Whether the grassroots created the movement—whether we said “we will speak for ourselves”—we are not the ones publishing books, we are not the ones getting quoted. We are not the ones being heard in what is becoming mainstream EJ. We need to start challenging our internal membership, our internal structures, our internal stuff, because this movement depends on it. Democracy is internal; you have to be the change you want to see in the world.

These are just some of the realities within the EJ Movement. There’s been an institutionalization of EJ through the government and class issues have become a point of division. That’s what governments, agencies, institutions and universities impose even while we struggle against it. We’ve seen this historical phenomenon repeated over the last twelve years. These are our challenges. ■

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