

From the Editor

By B. Jesse Clarke

In this issue we celebrate our 20th anniversary with reflections on the social and environmental justice landscape from 1990 to the present. When the journal was founded, the EJ movement was just beginning to be heard on the national stage. A succession of intense local struggles around the siting of toxic facilities in communities of color had brought the impacts of racism back into public view.

The movement welcomed a publication that could, in the words of founding editors Carl Anthony and Luke Cole, “strengthen the networks between environmental groups and working people, people of color and poor people.” In these times of multiple crises, as racial and economic justice seem ever more elusive, we are proud to play a part in reporting on the valuable thinking and work of this crucial coalition. In addition to a sampling of reprints from the last two decades, we share speeches and interviews from a cross-section of today’s engaged activists.

For communities of color and women—the majority population of this country and the world—apparent political victories, such as the election of a black president, the appointment of a woman secretary of state or a Latina supreme court justice, are visible symbols of decades of civil rights agitation and advocacy. It might be hoped that this hard-won diversity in the political class would lead to real social change. Similarly, the environmental movement has grown from being an elite concern of naturalists and wildlife lovers to a core issue in political life, with international, national, and local efforts bringing vast changes in how and where polluting processes are undertaken. Nonetheless, civil rights, human rights, and the rights of the earth itself are under intense assault. The EJ movement, with its synthesis of race, environmental, and economic analysis, is a fruitful ground in which to look for solutions.

Black Power vs. Imperial Economy

The African American experience, whether in slavery or the aftermath of Katrina or the abandonment of Detroit, is key to understanding the essential dynamics of

racial and economic injustice in the United States. In this issue we have a number of outstanding contributions on the subject. (See Racial Justice section, page 64.)

Demographic indicators for racial oppression are the same or worse than in the 1950s and ’60s. Felony disenfranchisement is growing at such a fast rate that in some states nearly 40 percent of African American men will be permanently denied the right to vote. (See Michelle Alexander on the new Jim Crow, page 75.) Or consider some recent statistics for African Americans: The unemployment rate is nearly double that for whites; 25 percent live below the poverty line; and imprisonment is 9.1 times higher than for Anglo whites.

In the face of this persistent structural racism, African American political leadership has been placed in a lose-lose position where actively championing black power is hazardous to their political lives. As reported by Allen-Taylor (page 70), even a progressive like Oakland Mayor Ronald Dellums with a lifetime commitment to social justice, avoids the word “black”—substituting the more palatable “diversity” in its place.

A quick look at the demographic trends in the Bay Area reveals a striking combination of mobility and concentrated poverty.* As middle class African Americans have dispersed throughout the region (with rising percentages living in former “whites only” areas), the political power of African American communities in cities has diminished. That intentional attempts to “gentrify out” African American populations may have guided or accelerated this trend is yet another example of the endurance of anti-black racism. (See James Tracy on HOPE VI public housing, page 58.) This dilution of African American political power in the cities paral-

* www.fairdata2000.com/Projects/Historical/index.html



lels the demobilization of popular power in the national arena—a phenomena that is true across racial lines.

As the global economy becomes ever more controlled by the imperial model (see R.A. Walker, page 49), the problem of holding decision makers—locally, nationally, and internationally—accountable to the people and principles that have brought them to power is more urgent than ever.

Sadly, black mayors are to the regional economic powers what presidents are to the national and international centers of economic power. It's not that these cities, states, or nations lack the wealth to sustain their own people but that they are forbidden from taking that wealth from private hands to use it on the people's behalf.

Shifting investment in manufacturing and other sectors is a key element in the economic strategy of neoliberalism, whose impact and intentions do not stop at the U.S. border, as Steven Pitts, David Bacon, and Gerald Lenoir point out in the Economic Justice section (page 81). The displacement of Mexican workers by “free-trade” agreements drives economic refugees into the United States. One could say that immigration policy and international investment strategies are two sides of the same dollar.

Understanding the imperial model of development also yields insight into basic infrastructure spending. Just as third world countries have been “developed” via International Monetary Fund loans that leave them crippled with debt, the transit system in Boston is weighted down with a debt burden generated by wasteful construction projects for politically connected contractors like Bechtel. (See Penn Loh, page 26; John Gibling, page 42.)

Today in Oakland, advocates have been waging a similar battle against an unfair transit project, which would spend \$500 million to ease transit for affluent air travelers while starving other essential transit systems. As Richard Marcantonio details (page 34), this battle took a different turn, thanks to a concerted strategy of legal and popular intervention (page 30).

The 17 Principles

The solution to many of these dilemmas is not esoteric. The EJ summit convened by the United Church of Christ in 1991 elucidated 17 principles (page 16) that are still as hard hitting today. Sadly, many of the trends decried then have only worsened.

The environmental destruction from BP's recent oil hemorrhage is uncannily similar to the 1968 oil spill off Santa Barbara, California, which helped put environmentalism into mainstream consciousness. And Arizona's anti-immigrant and anti-ethnic studies laws are not dissimilar to the Jim Crow and educational apartheid practiced in Alabama in earlier decades.

Entangled in two wars of occupation and facing crises in finance, housing, the environment, and immigration, the people of the United States today confront a landscape that bears comparison to both the Great Depression and the imperial defeats and social turmoil of the '60s.

The many youth interviews we conducted reveal an engaged next generation of leaders capable of linking issues in a way that was not possible 20 years ago. They live in an interconnected world and multitasking is not something they do only on the phone. In a given week, a student might go from a protest about cutbacks at their school, to a rally for immigrant rights, to a foreclosure protest at Bank of America, to a report on climate change. These new leaders are a vital indicator that movements for justice are on the rise.

As the climate warms, the winds of change are blowing hard. We hope that all of us can benefit from a better understanding of what has come before—so we might be better prepared for what is to come.

Read on!

P.S. Listen to *Radio RP&E*

We are pleased to announce the launch of *Radio RP&E*—audio recordings of in-depth interviews and speeches from the movements for racial, economic, and gender justice (www.urbanhabitat.org/audio). Look for indicators in the running heads over the articles for interviews and speeches available in this format. ■

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