

ECOLOGY and THE LEFT

THE HEAT IS ON...

*At this crucial point in the history of the Earth and its people, what hope and what visions could we have for a just, sustainable future? **Gopal Dayaneni** and **Mateo Nube** lay down a framework for action that ties together racial, economic, and ecological justice.*



The crisis

Contrary to popular claims, the world is not on the brink of an ecological crisis. We are already in one. Consider these facts:

We are currently experiencing the sixth great species extinction of life on this planet - species are becoming extinct at 1,000 times the natural rate.

Over half of the world's fresh water sources are polluted.

In the US alone, industry admitted to releasing 4.25 billion pounds of toxic chemicals in 2006.

At current rates of consumption, there will be no edible fish left in the oceans by 2050.

Two hundred years of resource intensive industrial production, driven by a global capital regime and the plague of over-consumption in wealthy countries and among wealthy classes in poor countries has put us under serious planetary stress. The most common face of the crisis is catastrophic climate destabilization, or "global warming," yet this is only one of several interconnected and mutually reinforcing problems:

We're experiencing a *toxic waste crisis* poisoning our land, air and water; a *fresh water crisis* with huge parts of humanity losing their access to clean potable water; a *food and agriculture crisis* where land is industrially consumed and depleted to produce export crops; a *large loss of biological and cultural diversity* - along with extraordinary extinction rates, that include indigenous communities who face cultural and physical genocide; and an *addiction to fossil fuels* that provokes global warming, war, and pollution.

The impact

Everywhere in the world those most directly impacted by these problems are poor and oppressed folk - both in the Global South and the Industrial North. Yet while many peoples' movements in the Global South have actively engaged in struggle around these issues for a long time as part of their "bread and butter" fights, the same cannot be said about move-

ments in the United States. With the notable exception of the environmental justice movement, these issues - until recently - have been largely absent from our organizing agenda.

The implications for racial and economic justice organizing in the US, however, are huge, and fairly immediate. Take, for example, the intersection between water stress and immigrant rights. Over the next 20 years, water stress in southern California will reach dramatic proportions. Changing climate patterns will not produce enough water to feed current consumption patterns. What will happen when the region can no longer sustain a human population of 15+ million people? As the situation worsens, what strategies will the dominant forces use to maintain "stability" and "order"? It is not unreasonable to expect draconian immigration laws and an increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric and scapegoating in this scenario.

Similarly, poor and marginalized communities in the US are ill positioned to weather the developing shifts in our food production system. In the last year alone, the price of basic staples like rice and corn has risen by more than 50 percent globally. Rising oil prices, falling crop yields, and a push to turn food into "biofuel" for cars are spelling the end of the "cheap food" era brought on by the industrial agriculture revolution. Unless people's movements in the US challenge the corporate seizure of food production systems and begin to build alternative food security and food sovereignty projects, there will be serious economic and health implications for poor communities across the country.

The challenge

As a Left, resolving this set of developing issues must become an intrinsic part of our alternative vision for society. If we allow ecological systems to collapse, it stands to reason that the collapse of economic and social systems will follow. So as social movement actors we must ask ourselves, what does it mean to engage with this set of issues? And what is the



vision we want to put forth around these questions?

Further, how do these realities inform our calculation of:

- Our political opportunities and strategy?
- The fights we take up?
- The alliances we build?
- The values and culture we promote?

Currently, oil is the life-blood of globalization. It is also the driving force pushing our ecological and economic system to the brink. Wide sectors of the capitalist class recognize that in order to avoid catastrophic climate change, we have no choice left but to cut our dependence on fossil fuels and dramatically reorganize societies, cities, nation states, and economies. Strategically, this means that *the nature of the economic and social reorganization will depend entirely on who is positioned to guide it*. Ideally, a prepared and forward-thinking Left can help build a post-globalized world based on local living democracies – deeply rooted in a sense of ecological place and centered on meeting its residents’ needs in an equitable way.

This immense set of challenges led a group of organizers from the Bay Area of California to convene a series of conversations around these issues in 2007. Facilitated by the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project, 30 individuals, representing 18 organizations, met to explore the intersection between ecology and racial and economic justice organizing. The process was extremely fruitful - participants emerged excited and hungry to integrate an ecological lens into their

existing racial and economic justice organizing with an eye towards finding solutions to this crisis, particularly ones that made sense for urban communities in struggle across the country. As a starting point, this process led us to conclude that our Left vision and strategy must:

- **Rethink how we produce, transport and consume stuff** - and make the new equation fit within the true ecological boundaries of our planet.
- **Integrate an ecological perspective into existing campaigns for racial and economic justice.** We must look for opportunities to tackle questions of sustainability in immigrant rights, housing, labor, and other organizing campaigns.
- **Organize and build campaigns to move us off of a fossil-fuel economy.** Our addiction to fossil fuels is not only the driving force behind these crises, it has also unleashed a potentially irreversible shift in stable climate patterns if not dealt with *immediately*.
- **Make race and poverty central to these campaigns and political struggles.** If we take the time to make the necessary links, we can build thoughtful solutions that *tackle poverty and environmental degradation at the same time*.
- **Develop an organizing approach framed around collective solutions** to these ecological crises. There are already hundreds of ways that environmental justice organizations and social movements have found to develop solution-oriented fights – around transportation

justice, food sovereignty, land reform, and communal water rights, to name a few. This approach will not only help us build power but also challenge the notion that individual solutions and consumer choices will get us out of this mess.

- **Maintain and build a strong internationalist perspective.** Solidarity, coordination, and accountability to Global South movements will be key in building lasting solutions.

Building ecological literacy

In order to succeed at this endeavor, we also realized that cultivating *ecological literacy* has become a central strategic and moral priority for our movement. Our conversation led us to understand that the Earth’s basic operating mechanisms must become part of our revolutionary vision if we are to have a chance at building the healthy, liberated, and vibrant world we desire. The fact is that the laws of nature exist independently of whether we choose to recognize them or not. The dominant economic narrative of the last century (for both the Left and the Right) has been based on the idea that the Earth’s resources are endless – that eternal growth and industrial development are central to human progress. Yet the Earth is finite – its health depends on symbiosis, limits, mutually beneficial relationships, balance, and zero waste.

Modern industrial society’s failure to recognize this has led us to an untenable situation – as journalist George Monbiot illustrates, “if our economy grows at 3 percent between now and 2040, we will consume in that period economic resources

equivalent to all those consumed since humans first stood on two legs.”

The cultural implications behind this shift towards ecological literacy are huge. The imperial mindset of our dominant industrial culture has made it okay for us to assume that humans can and should dominate nature (and each other). Western colonialism has advanced by actively persecuting land-based traditions that view the Earth and all living beings as sacred – it needed to do so to justify the exploitation of land, nature, and native peoples. The psychic break needed to heal the planetary crisis challenges us all to rediscover our true humanity and our sense of reverence for life.

In this pursuit, our urban and Western-centered Left has much to learn from indigenous and land-based movements who have maintained an understanding that our collective survival is deeply dependent on our relationship to the Earth. Without a cultural-historical relationship to the environment, a tree is just a log waiting to be stripped of branches. This is at the heart of the imperial/colonial logic: land is a place to build and all people and nature are resources to be consumed in the service of this logic.

Seizing the moment

Through this special *Left Turn* feature, we want to broaden the conversation nationally and internationally, in the hopes of sparking the necessary debate that will help strengthen our Left vision around these issues and move us towards building a saner, sustainable future. Ironically, these converging ecological crises bring with them a certain element of hope: crisis often generates new opportunities. In this case the contradictions of capitalism are rapidly leaking into the popular discourse. More and more people intuitively appreciate that our economic system is not equipped to protect our planet and its inhabitants. This presents a huge opening for a coherent, systemic Left critique and counter-proposal, given that a *revolutionary transformation* of the economy and society will be required to solve these crises.

Further, a nascent multi-racial movement is finally starting to take shape around some of these issues. Thanks in large part to the leadership of the environmental justice movement over the last 20 years, new community and labor alliances are building a base of support for a transition towards a “green jobs” paradigm that moves beyond fossil fuels. Food security campaigns are popping up in cities around the country. Urban land-reform movements are beginning to formulate a vision of community-control rooted in ecological sanity. These efforts need our support and need to be broadened.

By linking these campaigns to Global South movements and initiatives, we can lay the groundwork for the needed psychic break with the system. In the best-case scenario, our international organizing efforts will win a just Climate Stabilization Plan in the near term and sow the seeds for a revolutionary shift in the mid term.

Let’s get to work!

THE LIMITS OF ECOLOGY A GLOBAL SNAPSHOT OF RESOURCE INTENSIVE INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCE

CANADA: "Tar Sands" (also know as "extra heavy oil") generates three times the greenhouse gas emissions of conventional oil and gas. Yet fields under 54,000 square miles of northern Alberta forest are being developed for export to the US. In addition, this development has devastating implications for many Indigenous/First Nations peoples.



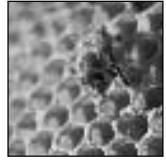
THE ARCTIC: Extensive melting of Arctic sea-ice in the summer of 2007 starkly demonstrated that serious climate-change impacts are already happening, both more rapidly and at lower global temperature increases than projected. Human activity has already pushed the planet's climate past several critical "tipping points". The loss of all eight million square kilometers of Arctic sea-ice now seems inevitable, maybe as early as 2010, 100 years ahead of projections.



SOUTHWEST US: There is a 50 percent chance Lake Mead, a key source of water for millions of people in the southwestern US, will be dry by 2021 if climate changes as expected and future water usage is not curtailed.* Las Vegas, LA, Phoenix, Tucson, San Diego, and others depend on Lake Mead for water.



North America: Pollinator species across the world are dying. Beekeepers in 24 US states lost up to 70 percent of their colonies in 2007. Bat species are experiencing a similar die-off. Climate change, damaged ecosystems, pesticides and toxins are probable causes. Humans are heavily dependent on pollinators – without them many food crops do not bear fruit.



MEXICO: In the state of Oaxaca, farmers have cultivated thousands of varieties of corn. In the last decade US farm subsidies and chemical-industrial agriculture have created huge surpluses, which are dumped into Mexico. This super-subsidized corn is sold so cheap that local farmers cannot compete, resulting in deeper impoverishment and fragmentation of communities. Many Oaxacans have had to leave their traditional lands to seek work in cities or in the US.



THE ANDES: The UN Panel on Climate Change warns that most of the glaciers feeding water to vast populations in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia could be gone by 2022 if global warming continues unabated.



INDIA: Due to the the "Green Revolution", rice varieties cultivated in India decreased from more than 100,000 to just ten. Over 150,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide in recent years as corporate control of farming has taken hold across the country. Many kill themselves by ingesting chemical pesticides produced by companies like Monsanto.



NIGERIA: Exporting electronic waste from the North to places like China, India and Nigeria results in massive impacts on workers and communities. Despite an international ban on the export of hazardous waste, the trade thrives in part because US refuses to sign the treaty. Another loophole is the "reuse" market. Nigeria has become one of the largest and fastest growing destinations. An estimated 400,000 pieces of electronics arrive for "reuse" every month, but up to 75% of it is unusable. Without proper infrastructure, heavy metals and other toxics are leaching into ground water and soil, and burning plastics produces carcinogenic, developmental and persistent toxins.



CHINA: 90% of groundwater under China's cities is contaminated. 60% of river water is unsuitable for human contact. Groundwater is dropping five feet *per year* in breadbasket areas. To address it's water shortages, China plans to build great big pipelines up to the Tibetan Himalayas. These would seize control of and divert water from rivers that feed all of Asia.



PACIFIC OCEAN: The largest landfill in the world is in the Pacific Ocean, where currents draw trash (largely plastic) into two floating masses. The Western mass (between California and Hawaii) is estimated to be more than twice the size of Texas*.



The UN Environment Program estimated in 2006 that every square mile of ocean hosts 46,000 pieces of floating plastic. Of the estimated 200 billion pounds of plastic produced every year, an estimated 10 percent end up in the ocean.



WATER

1% percent of the world's water is fresh water, over half of which is already polluted. Global consumption of water is doubling every 20 years, more than twice the rate of population growth. Under current patterns of climate change and water mismanagement, 3 billion people could be under permanent water stress by 2050.



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

The industrialization of food production through the "Green Revolution" of the 1950s and 60s and the "free trade" agreements of the 1990s allowed a few global corporations to seize ownership of all aspects of the food system – from land ownership, to seed and farm inputs, to distribution, processing and retail sale. This has driven traditional farming cultures all over the world to collapse. This stunningly rapid corporate seizure of global food production has produced dramatic reductions in food security and increases in environmental destruction.



WASTE AND TOXICS

Since World War II, more than 100,000 new chemicals have been created and deployed through industrial production, but most are never tested for adverse impacts on human health or the environment. Toxics find their way into almost every industrially produced item and almost every product becomes waste dumped in landfills, incinerators, oceans and waterways where toxics leach back into our environment.



ENERGY AND CLIMATE

"The Arctic is often cited as the canary in the coal mine for climate warming. Now as a sign of climate warming, the canary has died. It is time to start getting out of the coal mine."

—Climate Scientist Jay Zwally (who as a teenager hauled coal), December 2007



BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

At current rates of extinction, the planet stands to lose 90% of living languages *within a generation* – from 6,000 to 600. Indigenous peoples account for 80-90% of the world's cultural diversity. Simultaneously, species are becoming extinct at 1,000 times the natural rate. Harvard biologist Edward Wilson predicts that our present course will lead to the extinction of half of all plant and animal species by 2100.

NO WATER, NO FOOD. POLLUTING LAND AND WATER POLLUTES PEOPLE. CLIMATE CHAOS DISCRIMINATES AGAINST THE POOR. DIVERSITY IS OUR BEST DEFENSE.

MONOPOLIES >> MONOCROPS >> MONOCULTURE >> MONOTONY

Through the Ecological Lens

Interview by Gopal Dayaneni and Mateo Nube

Left Turn recently interviewed organizers from different areas of the movement to find out how they thought the notion of ecology fits into their work. Some of them have a storied history as ecological warriors, others have just begun to explore the intersection of ecology with racial and economic justice organizing.



 Claire Tran is the Director of Asian Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL). She participated in the 2007 Movement Generation retreats. Claire's on the far left holding her portable coffee mug - there are no plastic bottles in this picture.

Claire Tran

Asian Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL)

www.oases.org/whatwedo/aypal.php

Left Turn: What were the first steps you took towards integrating an ecological lens into your youth organizing work?

Claire Tran: The organizers at AYPAL have in no way been stellar examples of ecological warriors. But hey, hard-headed community organizers can change! We began with a staff study on the ecological crisis. And then we mourned. We dried our eyes and started to strategize organizational solutions. We felt strongly that as we give youth the facts on the crisis we also need to process collectively on how to move forward - to dream of a more sustainable system and concrete ways we can work towards this vision.

So far, we have been able to make small changes - incorporating a new workshop, adding a point of unity on ecological justice, a water taste test to show that tap water tastes the same or better than water in plastic bottles, bicycle carting our water in a big jug during the marches, and adding a new criteria for campaign identification - that our demands cannot lead to harmful impacts on the environment.

LT: How are you connecting questions of ecology to your broader political vision?

CT: Understanding how to build collective action and people's power in times of crisis is at the core of our work as we address the root causes of violence and high rates of homicides here in Oakland, CA. We are working to develop a new generation of youth organizers by training youth to come up with solutions to community issues and learn the importance of collective action. The key to truly addressing ecological crisis will not be by buying more hybrid cars but through collective action toward systematic change. Young people will be left having to deal with the continually harsher impacts of this ecological crisis. The ability to engage in collective action will mean the difference between a world of survivalists and a world of revolutionaries...



José Bravo is the Executive Director of the Just Transitions Alliance. JTA is a coalition of labor, economic and environmental justice activists, Indigenous people and working-class people of color looking to build a just transition from unsafe workplaces and environments to healthy, viable communities with a sustainable economy.

will unite workers and communities around the world in the fight for more regional economies modeled on the systems in nature: living wages for all workers, clean production, and zero waste. We will include the ecological and social costs all along the production cycle; such as energy, water, transportation, exploitation, displacement, etc.



Brahm is co-founder and Executive Director of People's Grocery, a community-based nonprofit organization that has attracted local and national attention for its effort to transform inner city food systems and advance food justice in communities of color.

Brahm Ahmadi

People's Grocery
www.peoplesgrocery.org

LT: How are you framing food system activism and sustainable agriculture activism as urban justice issues?

Brahm Ahmadi: The growing movement in the United States to create sustainable food and farming systems has achieved notable success through farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and an exploding organic food industry. Yet this progress in transforming the food system has, by and large, not engendered substantive improvement for low-income urban communities of color that are often the most disenfranchised from the food system, most vulnerable to its inequities, and most in need of benefiting from its reforms.

LT: What are some of the concrete steps you have taken to establish food sovereignty within urban low-income and people of color communities?

BA: Organizations such as People's Grocery have arisen to take a stand for "food justice" – the belief that all people, regardless

of social and economic constraints, have the right to healthy and high quality foods. People's Grocery and its allies work to advocate for and develop local food systems that centralize the needs of the urban poor and develop programs and enterprises that increase access to fresh foods, provide nutrition education, promote urban agriculture, and create local jobs. Additionally, we work to increase the leadership, voice, and perspective of low-income urban communities of color in shaping a food system that meets their needs for healthy food, jobs and economic development.

In 2009, we will be opening a grocery store to close the gap in food retail in West Oakland. Our store will provide a community-oriented and culturally-diverse shopping experience in which local, fresh, and high quality foods can be conveniently purchased at affordable prices and where healthy lifestyle choices are promoted through education programs, social events, and engaging customer service. Born out of a community consultation process that specified what the store should entail, People's Grocery's store will be staffed by locally-hired workers, operate as a worker-run cooperative and prioritize local sourcing practices to support regional producers and farmers.

Faith Gemmill

Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL)
www.ienearth.org/recoil-up/recoil.html

LT: What is the relationship between indigenous sovereignty and ecological justice?

Faith Gemmill: Indigenous subsistence lifestyles, cultures, and traditional social systems form a way of life that maintains the identity, physical health, spirituality, and survival of indigenous peoples around the world. The economic, social, and cultural rights of indigenous peoples remain inseparable



Faith Gemmill is the Program Director of Resisting Environmental Destruction on Indigenous Lands (REDOIL), a network of Alaskan Native tribes engaged in strategic action and organizing in resistance to unsustainable fossil fuel development.

ble and interdependent of our ancestral lands, territories and resources.

When we address ecological justice, we address it from the foundation of sovereignty. I've heard an elder state, "Sovereignty is inherent, it cannot be given to you, nor can it be taken away, it is inherent." When we practice the culture, traditions, language, spirituality, and ancestral way of life of our indigenous nations we are living as sovereign nations, with our whole self-governance intact, which many of our inherent values and way of life are derived from and have been for generations untold.

LT: How is the playing out in Alaska?

FG: In Alaska, there have been long fought efforts for recognition of Alaska Native subsistence rights, which would ensure our right to live our way of life, of traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering. Currently, fossil fuel development threatens the ecological integrity of our homelands and is one of the main threats to our sovereignty. In fact the federal government claims the need to steal our resources for "homeland security."

Attempts to access the remaining lands that Alaska Natives rely on for subsistence needs are an example of ecocide, part of an unjust US energy and economic development policy which basically undermines our subsistence rights as well as our sovereignty over our resources. How can a community be sovereign if a multi-national oil company is dictating the uses of their own lands, and the terms of their relationship to those lands?

The worst part of Indigenous history in relation to the United States is that we have been entrapped into land claims models that basically propagate expropriation of our lands from our control to benefit extractive industries, like oil companies.

When we are defending our homelands, and standing up for ecological justice, we are maintaining and breathing life into sovereignty. Indigenous peoples within the US and abroad are now more endangered than ever by national energy development policy. What purpose would recognition of subsistence or sovereign rights serve if your land is not intact? Indigenous peoples have to maintain our ancestral lands, territories, and resources so that we can be sovereign and self determined. It is as simple as that. Sovereignty is the root of our struggle and what we are standing up for.



Van Jones is the President and Founder of Green For All. Green For All is a national organization that aims to build an inclusive green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty.

Van Jones

Green For All

www.greenforall.org

LT: How do you think the Left should strategically approach the ecological reality we are in? How did you land on this concept of “Green for All”?

Van Jones: The day after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, civil rights leaders could have demanded (1) reparations for slavery, (2) inter-racial marriages and (3) a massive redistribution of wealth.

Such demands would have been justifiable – but foolish. “Maximum demands” like those would have created more resistance than support.

Thus early civil rights champions instead pressed “minimum demands” - for integrated buses, kindergartens and lunch counters. Malcolm X attacked this approach as too timid. But those modest demands knocked over the first dominoes, sparking mass movements that tore apartheid from US law books, led to the war on poverty, and helped stop a US war.

Alright: now with Earth itself imperiled, let’s be as savvy as our grandparents.

It’s fine for our “Malcolms” to directly challenge the paradigm of growth and consumption – or attack US militarism.

But to move large numbers, we also need smart, minimum demands – like the call for “green-collar jobs,” “green jobs, not jails,” and “greening the ghetto first.” Such slogans do not challenge everything that is wrong. But they can inspire pragmatic, working folks to take notice and get involved.

A family-friendly “eco-populism” can mobilize and unite millions who, at this point, won’t be mobilized or united by a more extreme set of demands. Such appeals can get the country taking the first practical steps (hard, dramatic, and inadequate as they will be) toward ecological sanity. And I trust that the momentum will build, through those collective efforts, for more comprehensive economic solutions.

Annie Leonard recently produced *The Story of Stuff* (www.storyofstuff.com), a 20-minute film that takes viewers on a provocative and eye-opening tour of the real costs of our consumer driven culture—from resource extraction to iPod incineration. A longtime environmental activist, Annie currently serves on the boards of the Global Anti-Incineration Alliance, the International Forum for Globalization and the Environmental Health Fund.



Annie Leonard

GAIA (Global Anti-Incineration Alliance) & *The Story Of Stuff*

www.no-burn.org

www.storyofstuff.com

LT: How should we take on consumer culture and consumerism as organizers?

Annie Leonard: I worry when I see campaigns aiming to inspire individuals to make environmental change primarily as consumers. At best, these campaigns may achieve marginal improvements; at worst, they subtly undermine our role as engaged citizens in an active democracy.

“Green” consumer campaigns fail to recognize that consumption patterns in the US are a structural problem. The choices available to us in the shopping mall or grocery store are limited and pre-determined by forces outside the store: by product designers, marketers, corporate officials, governments, and international institutions such as the World Trade Organization. Because we face a structural problem, we need a systemic solution. We need policies and programs that prioritize sustainability, equity, community health, and economic justice and we can only obtain these by coming together for collective political action. The leverage points to make systemic change are in the political arena, not the shopping mall.

We’ve got a problem with shopping in this country. The amount of time we spend shopping is increasing, while time spent building community and engaging in civil society is decreasing. The result is that we’re buried in stuff, while our

communities and civil society are eroding. I worry that programs that seek to make social change through shopping perpetuate our over-identification as consumers, while subtly undermining our power as engaged citizens and community members. For these reasons, I believe that moving beyond individual consumer-based campaigns to organizing for stronger collective action is the single most important thing we can do achieve real, lasting, transformative solutions to the many interconnected environmental, social, and economic issues of the day.

Brahm Ahmadi is co-founder and Executive Director of *People’s Grocery*, a community-based nonprofit organization that has attracted local and national attention for its effort to transform inner city food systems and advance food justice in communities of color.

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Claire Tran is the Director of *Asian Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL)*. AYPAL develops the leadership and community-organizing skills of youth in grades 8-12. AYPAL enables youth to become community leaders by giving them an opportunity to work cooperatively with their peers, families, and the neighborhood to seek positive changes.