

“Environmental Racism” Divides and Diverts Activists

by Lorna Salzman (September 2015)



In East Liverpool, Ohio, a hazardous waste incinerator has been operating since 1993, with uncontrolled emissions – over three thousand tons of toxics annually including lead and benzene – that threaten the health of the entire town. Residents of the black community closest to the plant have been trying to get the EPA to declare the plant an example of “environmental racism,” claiming that they, as opposed to the rest of the town, suffer disproportionately from these emissions. In 2005 the EPA did in fact designate it as such, based on the fact that the black population closest to the plant contained twice as many minority residents as other minority communities in the EPA region. But what the community did not realize is that no specific EPA action is required for such designations, which are, according to the EPA, simply to acknowledge such cases as “environmental justice” examples for use in internal government reviews.

You have to read closely to realize that East Liverpool is a mainly white community of a bit over 10,000 white residents and about 500 black residents, with the small black component living closer to the hazardous waste incinerator. You then have to ask whether the risks to the black community nearby are greater than those to the whole town. And then you have to ask just why this battle is being fought on a racial basis rather than an environmental, whole-community basis involving blacks and whites together. It is highly likely that given weather and wind, the emissions from the facility may actually fall at some distance from the incinerator rather than on the immediate surrounding area. In other words, the whole town is at risk from adverse health effects, not just the black community. (Unnoticed is the fact that the Beaver Valley 1 and 2 nuclear reactors in Shippingsport, PA, are only 8 miles away, a trivial distance as serious accidents like Chernobyl in Russia and Fukushima in Japan have shown us).

So why was the major opposition to the plant’s operation (even when within

“legal” limits) reliant primarily on the argument that the plant’s operation fit the federal criteria for “environmental racism,” namely that the minority community suffered disproportionately from the risk of the plant to human health? Was the white majority of East Liverpool persuaded by the black community that this was their ace in the hole to shut the plant? Did the white community and black community work together from the beginning? Was the charge of “environmental racism” the first and/or sole basis for their complaint? And if the black community was the sole plaintiff accusing the plant’s owners of violating what they thought was the law, where was the rest of the town?

So many unanswered questions. But until they are answered, it behooves the rest of us to be cautious in how we perceive and describe a problem. Regrettably, minority communities have chosen a path to fight their battles that is explicitly racial, *i.e.* based on charges of racism and inequality, in preference to describing the problem as a political one, a regulatory failure, or an environmental one, (*i.e.* pollution) shorn of the term “racism.” This serves a political purpose of course, not only unifying the community but separating it, both in strategy and policy, from the broader non-racial context, and above all maintaining a leadership role in the community. In effect, the minority community has chosen to view pollution narrowly, as a race problem rather than an environmental one....“racial pollution” might be more accurate.

In this particular case, this distinction is egregious because it suggests that the rest of the East Liverpool community is not affected by the incinerator, which is hardly the case with ANY hazardous-waste facility unless there is literally zero emissions...which of course is NEVER the case. Further, it permanently sets the black community apart from the rest of the town politically, when unified civic action is desperately needed. The notion that a defense based on racism would be more powerful and effective in influencing government policy is not only naive but self-defeating. Which is more influential: a group of a few hundred blacks or a group of 12,000 blacks and whites? It certainly seems that, in this case at least, the black community would rather have been right than win.

An important factor in the location of potentially polluting facilities is being overlooked: the cost of land. And land costs are notably lower in communities of color than in neighborhoods of upscale luxury homes or apartments. They are usually on the fringes of a city or town where there is plenty of vacant land to

begin with, and where land costs and taxes are lower. Furthermore, in many cases and possibly this one, the polluting facility was built long before many minority families moved in....families who could not afford the land, home costs and taxes prevalent in the more affluent parts of town. Those who moved in after 1993 benefitted from lower costs; the subsequent operation of the incinerator insured that land costs and taxes would remain low.

What we can learn from this, as with similar battles, is that there is a large and probably unbridgeable gap between those who see race and class as the battleground, as opposed to those who see economic inequality as the main target. This is at the root of the doubts of the American black community about whether democratic socialist Bernie Sanders cares enough about its concerns. In fact Sanders' record on fighting racism and discrimination is impeccable but largely overlooked by blacks, who seem intent on forcing Sanders to place it above all the other urgent concerns such as universal health care, climate change, foreign policy and economic disparity. He has courageously resisted this pressure, and quite rightly.

What aggravates all of this is the continued refusal of the black community to integrate its own concerns into the broader ones and to join with other non-black activists in promoting a broader social, economic and environmental agenda. The failure to do this is contributing to a growing and increasingly acrimonious racial divide as blacks treat their own allies with disrespect bordering on contempt. Even today, blacks resist joining any movement, no matter how congenial to their interests, that is not led by blacks. It seems that they prefer to be separate and lose rather than integrated and win. The emergence of black power has apparently rejected pragmatism in favor of ideology, an ideology that serves the perpetuation of the group rather than the perpetuation of the earth's life support systems, that widens the race divide, that blindly promotes the untenable goal of changing peoples' hearts, that ignores the economic and political roots of social and environmental decay, that would rather point a wagging finger to induce general societal guilt than acknowledge the true enemies in Washington and Wall St., and which stubbornly continues to define environmental problems as racial ones, a formula that guarantees failure.

The real question to be asked in the East Liverpool case is just why the black community, together with the rest of the town, did not pursue action, legal or otherwise, to eliminate the hazardous emissions, period, without playing the

race card. There is also an open question as to whether the black community benefitted from jobs at the facility, a relevant question for a very small low-population town with a small tax base. This question is at the heart of the problem at hand as well as similar problems that have been designated examples of "environmental racism." It suggests strongly that the race card may be not only irrelevant but downright destructive of genuine broad environmental campaigns and partnerships. Black activist leaders and groups should face this possibility honestly, putting aside their preconceptions about white environmentalists who, they claim, do not take black concerns seriously enough. In the longer term, one hopes that the black groups will retract their quite mistaken condemnation of white environmental groups and form much-needed alliances in the public interest rather than the interest of a particular racial group.

Social justice is necessary but not sufficient. The social justice movement is badly misguided in trying to squeeze the environment into social and economic justice concerns, when it is the exact reverse that is needed.

Putting social justice ahead of ecology is like insuring that life preservers on a sinking ship are distributed equally to whites and blacks while doing nothing to save the ship.

Lorna Salzman's career as an environmental activist and writer began when the late David Brower hired her to be the regional representative of Friends of the Earth in NYC. Later she worked as an editor on *National Audubon's American Birds* magazine and as director of Food & Water, an early opponent of food irradiation, and then spent three years as a natural resource specialist in the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and in 2004 she sought the U.S. Green Party's presidential nomination. She is the author of "[here](#)."

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