



# THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

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Community **Action**

## The omnipresence of environmental racism and classism

June 1, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 22

The long-standing and partisan debate over the subject of climate change ramped-up even more recently at the news of America's decision to pull-out of the Paris climate accord. And although an overwhelming majority of scientists, along with many corporations, argue that there is no debate and climate change is indeed a reality, there are still dissenting voices that are wielding considerable power.

A number of analysts, activists, and climate experts have suggested that the environment and our stewardship of it, is the defining issue of the 21st century. And, such warnings are not new. The roots of the modern environmental movement stretch back to social and political ideologies from the early 19th century. Some of these include the Romantic Movement, the conservation movement, and the early environmental protection societies. Though similar ideas, strategies and conservationist programs continued into the early part of the 20th century, particularly in Europe, it was not until the post-World War II era that environmentalism in America truly began to take shape.

In 1970, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded and the inaugural Earth Day was celebrated. Shortly thereafter, organizations such as Greenpeace and the decidedly radical Earth First were spawned. It was also in the 1970s that the

United States Department of Energy established weatherization and energy conservation initiatives.

Not only do such services help those in poverty save money, but they also conserve energy and reduce the carbon footprint of each home.

So, during the last half-century the environmental movement has made a decisive impact in the United States. And yet, in the midst of the discourse around environmentalism, a related environmental topic gets short shrift and is consistently consigned to the margins of the discussion.

The particular topic that I am referring to is that of environmental justice, where the lack of said justice is clearly drawn along racial and class lines. The EPA defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

The EPA cites this definition of environmental justice as its goal "for all communities and persons" in America, yet readily acknowledges that this goal is far away from being achieved. Although environmental justice might be the goal, environmental racism and classism remain the reality. As such, the poor and communities of color across the nation are disproportionately subject to environmental hazards that other communities are generally protected from.

In American cities, neighborhoods with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities are much more likely to live near toxic landfills, hazardous waste facilities, abandoned and decaying buildings, and environmental pollutants such as asbestos and other dangerous chemicals.

In fact, a study published by the University of Minnesota revealed that Americans of color are approximately 50 percent more likely than white Americans to breathe in toxic compounds such as nitrogen dioxide.

Each and every day in the United States, environmental racism is occurring in both subtle and unmistakable ways. There are numerous documented cases of large-scale environmental racism, with one of the most famous cases occurring in Chicago. Sixty years ago, the Altgeld Gardens housing community was built on an abandoned landfill on the far South Side of Chicago. Originally built for African American veterans of World War II, Altgeld Gardens is surrounded by several landfills, industrial plants, abandoned steel mills, and dozens of toxic waste facilities including a chemical waste incinerator. Some of the pollutants and toxic chemicals that affect the residents of Altgeld Gardens are mercury, xylene, lead, ammonia, and dangerous biphenyls and hydrocarbons.

The water quality in this community has been called “unfit for human consumption and recreation,” and the residents have been shown to suffer from alarmingly high rates of several types of cancer, including pediatric brain cancer. Higher than normal rates of asthma, fungal infections, and other serious illnesses are pervasive in Altgeld Gardens. Today, more than 3,000 people still reside in Altgeld Gardens, the overwhelming majority of whom are African Americans.

Of course, one doesn't have to travel to Chicago to find examples of environmental racism. Here in the Twin Cities, organizations such as Environmental Justice Advocates for Minnesota (EJAM), the Sierra Club's North Star Chapter, and the Center for Earth Energy and Democracy are working with local communities to fight the scourge of environmental racism.

Yet there is much work to be done, as is demonstrated by the Center for Earth Energy and Democracy's “Twin Cities Environmental Justice Mapping Tool.” This interactive tool is designed to illustrate levels of exposure to environmental hazards in the Twin Cities based on race and class. The mapping tool demonstrates that local landfills, leak sites, petroleum-contaminated areas, industrial plants, and other hazardous waste sites are located near neighborhoods with significant populations of color.

While there are many individuals and organizations in the fight against environmental racism, this issue still does not get the attention that it needs. Renowned astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson often speaks of all the ways that the universe can kill us all including via climate change.

On the local level, perhaps we must all ask ourselves the one question that others in the environmental movement have begun to pose as well: “Is my neighborhood killing me?”

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