



Promote Environmental Justice

The Tragedy of “Sacrifice Zones”

Environmental justice (EJ) emerged as a concept in the United States in the early 1980s. EJ describes a social movement that focuses on the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. EJ is an important part of the struggle to improve and maintain a clean and healthful environment, especially for those who live, work, and play closest to the sources of pollution – communities of color, lower income, and Indigenous peoples – but who produce virtually none of the pollution. Tragically, these marginalized communities are sometimes called sacrifice zones.

Recent legislative efforts in Massachusetts aim to qualify an environmental justice population as a neighborhood meeting one or more of these criteria:

- The annual median household income is not more than 65% of the statewide annual median household income.
- Minorities comprise 40% or more of the population.
- 25% or more of households lack English-language proficiency.
- Minorities comprise 25% or more of the population, and the annual median household income of the municipality in which the neighborhood is located does not exceed 150% of the statewide annual median household income.

Achieving environmental justice and racial justice are intertwined because the systems that caused the climate emergency are racist. Fossil-fuel infrastructure – businesses like fracking, natural gas pipelines and compressor stations, oil extraction and refining, dirty industries like steel and auto manufacturing, and countless others – more likely than not is built in neighborhoods and communities populated by people of color and Indigenous groups that too often endure poverty, poor schools, and substandard medical care.

Capitalism has forced many communities to sacrifice culture and tradition for economic survival. It has also defaced and destroyed land long held as sacred. Creating a just and sustainable transition must include opportunities for all traditions and cultures to flourish, recognizing them as integral to a healthy and vibrant economy. It should also make reparations for land that has been stolen and/or destroyed by capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, genocide, and slavery.