



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.

A Shameful History

Powerful people know that exploiting marginalized communities is the fastest route to even more power. About 400 years ago, American slave traders started kidnapping African people by the millions and shipping them in unspeakable, sometimes deadly conditions to America. Once here, they were for generations enslaved to provide free labor, largely for the burgeoning cotton industry. Countless slaves died in servitude from starvation, beatings, or exhaustion. Many women were raped by their masters. Yet many of our founding fathers were slave owners themselves, despite proclaiming that all men are created equal. Counter to the accounts told in our school books, our forebears set in motion a shameful chapter in American history.

Later, in the early 1800s, American cotton farmers wanted desperately to expand their holdings to millions of acres of rich farming land in states of the Southeast. Just one speedbump: the “Indian problem” – the native Americans who had occupied and cultivated these lands for generations. In the 1830s, President Andrew Jackson ordered the removal of all native Americans living on these

lands – some 125,000 men, women and children – marching them at gunpoint hundreds of miles on a “trail of tears” to specially designated “Indian territory” across the Mississippi. Plainly said, white Americans stole the land of native peoples, murdering and sickening untold numbers of them in the name of “progress.”

Black Americans in particular have been dying in disproportionate numbers ever since. Often living in poverty as a legacy of enslavement, Black Americans continue to bear a lopsided burden of the by-products of fossil-fuel infrastructure – killed or sickened from exposure to toxic chemicals in the air they breathe and the water they drink.

As he lay dying in 2020 on a Minneapolis street with a police officer’s knee crushing his windpipe, George Floyd pleaded at least 20 times, “I can’t breathe!” It’s a refrain echoed for generations of families living in sacrifice zones from coast to coast, who find themselves disproportionately close to hazardous-waste landfills, waste-transfer stations, incinerators, garbage dumps, diesel bus and truck garages, auto body shops, smokestack industries, industrial hog and chicken processors, oil refineries, chemical manufacturers, and radioactive-waste storage areas.

Power Over People

Money and power work to keep our social and economic systems unjust. The rich and powerful extract value from the natural world ultimately to benefit people like themselves. Who pays? Black, Brown and Indigenous Americans, the poor, and other marginalized communities continue sacrificing their lives for the continued comfort of people in power.

The climate emergency is a symptom of the same system of haves and have-nots. It’s what happens when people in power view the lives of everyone else, particularly marginalized people and non-human species, as expendable, to benefit shareholders’ profit and win political votes. These truths are painful to look at, but it’s more painful to watch a loved one die on the street with a knee to the throat.

The fossil fuel industry exemplifies how the intransigence of its players to accept progressive change has created an existential threat to life on earth and economic decline in communities in which it operates. Big Oil continues to deny the science of climate change, lobby for government subsidies, build bigger and more dangerous pipelines, exploit oil extraction from public lands, employ disastrous techniques like fracking, and avoid advanced strategies that would help save us from the worst effects of the climate crisis. The industry’s addiction to greed and the status quo – even in the face of declining profits – must be resisted for the sake of all peoples, their communities, cultures, and the flora and fauna we so treasure.

Fighting for Change

Solving the climate emergency must include ending racism. As climate advocates, we must work aggressively to reform the existing system and replace it with one that repairs past harms and redistributes power meaningfully in favor of people of color and other marginalized communities. Every one of us who benefits most from how things are right now has a deep ethical responsibility to insist on doing away with laws, cultural norms, and institutions that promote or condone racism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear what the EJ movement has been telling us for decades: low-income and immigrant communities, and people of color and Native American heritage are being hardest hit by the pandemic, in large part because of prolonged exposure to high levels of pollution.

The fight to lessen the effects of climate change is a fight for environmental justice. People everywhere in the world are feeling the impacts, but the people suffering most are the ones who have done the least to cause the problem.

We must build visionary economy that is very different than the one in which we now exist. This requires ending the bad while building the new. We must adopt initiatives that shift from dirty energy to energy democracy, from funding highways to expanding public transit, from building incinerators and landfills to achieving zero waste, from industrialized food systems to food sovereignty, from gentrification to community land rights, from military violence to peaceful resolution, and from rampant destructive development to ecosystem restoration. Workers and communities must have control over the decisions that affect their daily lives.

Progress may be on the way. Early in his Presidency, Joe Biden moved boldly to secure environmental justice and spur economic opportunity for all. He formalized his commitment to make environmental justice a part of the mission of every federal agency. He directed them to develop programs, policies, and activities to address the disproportionate health, environmental, economic, and climate impacts that have disproportionately penalize disadvantaged communities.

For example, Biden created the government-wide Justice40 Initiative with the goal of delivering 40% of the overall benefits of relevant federal investments to disadvantaged communities and tracking performance toward that goal through the establishment of an Environmental Justice Scorecard.

350 Central Mass applauds these long-overdue initiatives, and we intend to keep pressure on the President to fulfill his promises. We work with other climate-action groups in Central Massachusetts and the communities most at risk to address climate injustice wherever it rears its ugly head. Join us in this fight!