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Labor & ecologists map joint action

OAKLAND

THREE HUNDRED people attended a conference on "The Labor Movement and Hazardous Wastes", June 4 at the Alameda County Labor Temple. Progressive ecologist and author Barry Commoner keynoted the conference which was sponsored by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), and endorsed by a number of labor and environmental groups including the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. Participants were attempting to find ground for united action by the labor movement and environmental activists.

Commoner said the central issue was whether environmental improvements would conflict with the need for jobs and progress. Unemployment has always been a characteristic of this economic system, and was not invented by environmentalists, he added.

Many environmental health problems, Commoner said, result from synthetic substances being introduced into the environment without adequate testing and scrutiny. Thousands of new plastics, dyes, and solvents are introduced yearly.

Typically, hazardous substances have not been recognized as dangerous until they have caused a lot of severe illness or some serious damage to the environment. Frequently attention has been focused on substances because of their disruption of the environment while their effect on human health has gone unnoticed.

FOR EXAMPLE, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), chemicals used as electrical insulators in transformer manufacturing and which are now found in significant quantities in the Hudson River, first received attention because of their effects on Baltic fish and eagles. If concern for the effects on people's health had been greater they would have been spotted as a hazard 40 years ago.

A medical paper from the 1930s indicated PCB poisoning among 23 black workers at a Georgia plant. The examining physicians passed off the malady as due to "aversion to work".

Commoner pointed to the new Toxic Substances Act, passed with strong support from labor and environmental groups, as the beginning of a remedy. The bill requires premarket testing and notification of newly synthesized chemicals.

Rafael Moure, an industrial hygienist employed by OCAW, noted the gains made as a result of the Shell strike. In a strike that lasted several months in 1973, Shell workers established the right to a say on

in-plant health conditions. Lung function tests, instituted as a result of the strike settlement, showed the presence of obstructive lung disease in 75 of 228 workers tested. Twenty-six workers have filed compensation claims.

Moure cited the close relationship between the workplace and the general environment. For example, many hazards common to the work environment are also dangerous to the general population. Common action by labor and environmental groups could help meet the hazards in both cases. Examples given by Moure included asbestos and aromatic solvents which have replaced lead in gasoline. Moure said OCAW had addressed itself to community issues.

ANTHONY MAZZOCCHI, citizenship-legislative director of OCAW, told the audience that legislation to reform the National Labor Relations Act should be given high priority by people seeking to improve the environment. He said current regulations make organizing unorganized workers very difficult, and unorganized workers will never be able to speak out about health and environmental problems.

For example, 24 of the 27 new standards proposed under the Occupational Safety and Health Act were instigated by the labor movement and public interest groups. Without the force of organized labor OSHA would have let these standards languish in a bureaucratic malaise as it has a multitude of others.

Thomas Williams of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Solid Waste described provisions of the new Solid Waste Disposal Act. The Act charges EPA with identifying, promulgating, and disposing of hazardous wastes.

Jean Siri, an environmentalist active in Contra Costa County, said the private sector could not be trusted to handle the waste disposal problem. She cited the case of a dump in Contra Costa County that is giving off carcinogenic hydrocarbons, and another case in California where Agent Orange, a herbicide which caused birth defects in Vietnam, was being dumped where the public could be exposed.

THE CONFERENCE was successful in outlining possible united programs for labor and environmental activists. Several speakers said the two groups have a common enemy, monopoly corporations, whose power must be curbed if any headway is to be made on these problems.

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