The Environmental Justice Movement in South Baltimore

written by Nicole Fabricant | February 22, 2018

In an era when the federal government is increasingly dominated by fossil-fuel interests that limit regulation of oil rigs and pipelines, the environmental justice movement seems to have diminished significantly.

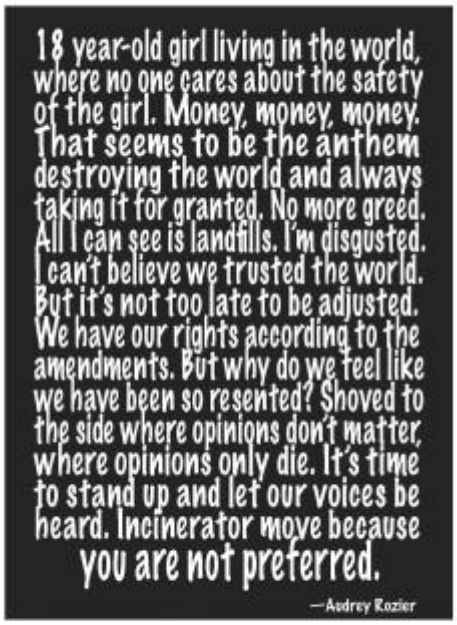
Recently, this apparent fact was belied by audience reactions to Lois Gibbs, Love Canal organizer, winner of the first Goldman Environmental Prize, and now with the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, which she founded. Listening to a panel about the future of the environmental justice movement under Trump, the audience appeared to gain a renewed energy for local initiatives. Lois, in her mid-to-late 60s, sat next to 22-year-old Destiny Watford (2016 Goldman Environmental Prize winner) who proposed an end to the trash-to-energy incinerator industry in her South Baltimore community. Watford shook her head affirmatively as Gibbs passionately declared, "Nothing is coming from Washington today! Organizing and change must occur at the local level and the state level. We must think locally and act in terms of states!" Her passion and words resonated deeply, and she spoke directly to the work I have done in Baltimore for the last seven years, which has produced victories despite the horrors of privatization, deregulation, and cronyism that dominate at the national level.

In early 2010, developers announced the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project. It was a plan to build the largest trash incinerator in the nation in South Baltimore, burning 4,000 tons of waste per day to generate "clean," "green," and "renewable" energy. Then-Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said, "I'm very proud to have this project in Baltimore city" and added that she deemed the announcement event a truly great day in Baltimore. She claimed the incinerator would provide "jobs for skilled union workers" and serve as "a model for green, renewable energy."[1]

The idea of converting waste into energy became increasingly popular in United States after the global energy crisis of the 1970s. In the last twenty-five years, waste conversion has quietly become significant within energy investment circles in the United States. This occurred in part because of federal and state legislation that incentivized the market to revalue waste materials and to produce technological innovation. In November 2011, Maryland's Governor Martin O'Malley (a Democrat) signed a bill making trash incineration a tier-one renewable energy like wind, solar, and geothermal. Energy Answers International, the corporation invested in building the incinerator in Baltimore, cut a check for $100,000 to the O'Malley-led Democratic Governors Association on the very same day that he indicated support for state legislation promising trash-to-energy incineration. The new plant was expected to import needed jobs to deindustrialized Baltimore. The fact that it promised to provide schools with "green energy" was also compelling. Energy Answers maneuvered to avoid federal and state regulation. They argued that the facility was an energy plant, not an incinerator, and therefore could be sited less than a mile from Curtis Bay Elementary School.

Not discussed was the fact that the trash-to-energy incinerator would release thousands of pounds of lead, mercury, fine particulate matter, and carbon dioxide into Curtis Bay, a deeply impoverished

South Baltimore community with the highest rates of asthma and respiratory disease in the United States as a result of its long history of industrial pollution. This specific zip code was ranked in 2009 as the second worst area in the nation for toxic air emissions, and today it has the dubious honor of having the worst air quality in the state of Maryland.[2] Curtis Bay represents a kind of palimpsest containing layers of historic pollution of the land, air, water, and people. Local bodies are a primary repository for this toxicity.



While East and West Baltimore have been defined by a history of residential and racial housing segregation and white flight from the city, South Baltimore is a distinct space of hyper-industrialization. Public-health scholar Lawrence Brown defines the central city's racialized geography as one of economic development forming an L shape on a city map, versus the butterfly shape of Black community neglect. [3] Curtis Bay—located farther south—has been characterized by land-use and development decisions that led to people being displaced by heavy industries. Today, these industries contribute over 87 percent of all toxic stationary-source emissions in Baltimore city and pose health risks to the community.[4] The history of Curtis Bay exemplifies the environmental health inequities laid out in the landmark 1987 report, entitled Toxic Waste and Race in the United States, that propelled a national environmental justice movement.[5]

This peninsula of South Baltimore historically has been a hub of resource movement, transport, and waste disposal in the U.S. Northeast. The area was a central site for shipbuilding during and after World War II. As a result, the area became an amalgamation of polluting industries including but not limited to shipbreaking, chemical production, and manufacture of agricultural pesticides and fertilizers. In addition, Curtis Bay is a portal through which nonrenewable fossil fuels like coal coming from Appalachia are shipped to other parts of the United States. Baltimore has the second largest coal-export pier in United States. Critically, the open-air coal pit there sits near a playground in the heart of Curtis Bay. Most of the coal (18 million tons) is being exported to Europe, Asia, and Ukraine. Since Trump took office, Baltimore has seen an increase of 25 percent in its coal exports.

Further, Curtis Bay is a place for storing crude, volatile, and explosive oil. CSX trains travel unmarked railways in this community, carrying Bakken crude oil fracked in North Dakota in outdated DOT-111 cars. A year ago, there was a train derailment and explosion close to downtown Baltimore and less than 10 miles from Curtis Bay. Finally, coal pier and petroleum storage tanks encircle residents' homes, schools, and churches in the area.

These industries pose great danger to the health and well-being of Curtis Bay, but no recent incident exposed the "expendability" and "disposability" of the community more than the most recent chemical lockdown in this area. During September 2017, state emergency officials were called in after a chemical leak on nearby Fairfield Road. Emergency steps were taken to make certain that residents remained inside with the windows tightly sealed. The leak was of chlorosulfonic acid, a powerful chemical used to make soap and detergents, which can turn into a lethal gas when it is exposed to the air. Acid was released through a valve while being unloaded from a tanker at the Solvay Industries plant. While no one was injured, and the CDC quickly declared the community safe, thus ending the emergency lockdown, the larger issue of toxicity that Brown and Black bodies are exposed to on a daily basis remains.

For the past several years, students at Benjamin Franklin High School, in Curtis Bay, have been organizing to elevate these issues to the larger Baltimore community. For example, Destiny Watford, a Benjamin Franklin graduate, is now an undergraduate at Towson University and organizer for United Workers,[6] a human rights organization in Baltimore. She and her friends declared a citywide campaign to bring an end to trash-to-energy incineration, saying, "We are tired of our community being a dumping ground!" She described the health and security of her community "as being sacrificed for profit." For four years, Watford has organized (as a high-school student and beyond) to reduce the exposure of Curtis Bay residents to the hazardous pollutants the proposed incinerators will emit. While a high-school senior, she and her friends at Benjamin Franklin began to question the health impact of an incineration plant. She states, "So we spent a lot of time researching incineration and its consequences to our health. We found out that it would be creating a lot of pollution and that Curtis Bay already had some of the worst pollution in the nation. To put an incinerator in a place that already had so much pollution was a violation to our basic human rights." As Destiny has said many times, "That is what triggered our politics. We organized based upon the fact that we didn't know anything about the incinerator and felt outraged by the fact that our Maryland governor supported the project."

From this early organizing, Free Your Voice was created to build a grass-roots campaign to educate and mobilize residents about the consequences of trash-to-energy incineration. Early in the campaign, advocates learned that Energy Answers received funding through advance sales of promised, cheap incineration-generated electricity to public entities such as school systems and libraries. At that point, the campaign took a new turn. It directly targeted the Baltimore City Public School System and Baltimore County School System with a massive divestment campaign. In 2013-2014 the campaign gained momentum. Free Your Voice members attended a school board meeting and demanded that the Baltimore Public School System terminate its contract to buy energy from the incinerator. Two youth leaders of Free Your Voice wrote and performed a rap song about contaminated air and the future role of the incinerator in enlarging health risks. Audrey Rozier, a young artist, rapped the following lyrics to the School Board:

18-year-old girl living in the world, where no one cares about the safety of the girl. Money, money, money. That seems to be the anthem destroying the world and always taking it for granted. No more greed. All I can see is landfills. I'm disgusted. I can't believe we trusted the world. But it's not too late to be adjusted. We have our rights according to the amendments. But why do we feel like we have been so resented? Shoved to the side where opinions don't matter, where opinions only die. It's time to stand up and let our voices be heard. Incinerator move because you are not preferred.

United Workers-Free Your Voice also organized a “sunflower parade” through the streets of Curtis Bay in April 2015, featuring the Christian Warriors Marching Band and hundreds of hand-painted sunflowers. Their vision, conveyed through the sunflowers, is a city that embraces fair development and sustainable futures. Local performers and artists, such as Valeska Populoh and Ellen Cherry, have written and produced plays like *The Holy Land*. The cultural arm of the local movement brought performances to community events like the Fairfield Reunion, a neighborhood gathering at the Curtis Bay Recreation Center, and the Human Rights Dinner. These events provide social respite, solidarity exchanges between parts of the movement, and an honoring of leadership. Performance and art are used to tell stories about forms of community displacement in South Baltimore and as a vehicle to project and amplify community voices into places of affluence across the city. For example, in March 2015, Baltimore City Schools agreed to end their agreement with the Energy Answers Incinerator Project because of the growing and visible pressure applied by Free Your Voice. This remarkable victory removed an important source of revenue for the incinerator project and narrowed its margin of profitability.

The campaign produced larger citywide alliances focused on the role of the state of Maryland in validating the incinerator project. For example, nearly 200 people from across the city marched in December 2015 in solidarity with United Workers-Free Your Voice and rallied outside the Maryland Department of Environment (MDE). They urged officials to “pull the permits” for the Fairfield Renewable Energy Project. Importantly, the expiration date for the proposed project had passed.

Locked outside the building, the protestors chanted, “We’re holding our breath,” referencing the long history of toxic and polluting industries in their community as well as the hazard of over-policing: The march occurred around the time that city jurors reached a deadlock in the first Freddy Gray trial, on April 19, 2015. Freddy Gray’s death was, at the time, the most recent attack upon Brown and Black bodies. Protestors at MDE switched from “we’re holding our breath” to “we cannot breathe,” explicitly painting the connection between pollutant and police toxicity. (Gray had told Baltimore police officers, “I can’t breathe.”) The fast violence of police brutality in communities like Curtis Bay and the slow violence of environmental toxicity and high levels of lead poisoning are in dynamic interplay with issues of class and race. The cumulative effects are highly destructive and therefore might have resulted in demobilization and paralysis. Instead, United Workers-Free Your Voice and other citywide and local groups were unwilling to surrender. In March 2016, MDE pulled the permit and the Energy Answers project was defeated, at least for now. However, the fight has not ended with the state’s rejection of the incinerator.

Reclaiming the Land

Energy Answers had planned to build its incinerator on land that formerly housed an agricultural-chemicals plant owned by FMC Corporation. Presently, there is an effort to reclaim the land from FMC to build a community land trust. The intention is to move from protest against present policies to building an alternative to the current neoliberal development model. In some respects, United Workers-Free Your Voice sees “fast (police) violence” and “slow (environmental toxics) violence” against communities of color as embedded in the long history of racist housing development, deindustrialization, and disinvestment in Baltimore. Since the 1970s, the city of Baltimore has pursued a trickle-down development model, with millions of public subsidies funneled through private investors and expected to reach residents of very poor Black and Brown communities. Predictably, benefits of this neoliberal development model have not trickled down to lower-income residents, but rather led to the expansion of low-wage service sector jobs that in turn produce sporadic work schedules, few benefits, and stagnant wage growth. As these local economies have stagnated and public services have been diminished, the state has in turn criminalized the most acute victims of this decline, particularly Black males. In doing so, they saddle them with criminal histories pushing them ever more deeply into dead-end or criminal employment. These trends are

especially troubling in the city of Baltimore, where a third of households are at risk of homelessness or are presently without housing. Further, tens of thousands of houses decay while remaining vacant, a visible reminder of the failure of the current development model.

It is within this context of failed policy that United Workers-Free Your Voice is advancing community land trusts as at least a partial solution to the sediments of environmental, housing, and economic decay that have come to shape the past, present, and future of poor communities across Baltimore. They are proposing to build a community land trust in Curtis Bay that would energize the neighborhood, retain public subsidies, and provide housing resistant to speculative pressure. As a community organizer from the Baltimore neighborhood of Wesport describes it, "Over decades, speculative housing has produced high rents. Despite being surrounded by several large developments such as the M&T stadium … none has been a source of significant income or livable wages for Wesport's residents at large." The idea for the land trust—initiated by United Workers and developed by a coalition of housing advocates—is that a community organization will hold in trust land that can be used for things like affordable housing, parks, playgrounds, or any other development purpose. The land trust will build houses on the land to be sold to low-income workers through traditional mortgages. The homeowner owns the house, but the land underneath remains the possession of the community organization.[7]

Community land trusts would incubate new housing and jobs insulated from market forces. The initiative is intended to increase collective community wealth through the development of clean-energy jobs and affordable housing to meet human needs in the most marginalized areas of Baltimore. The coalition member groups are to seed this project with a $20 million grant (city funds committed to community-based jobs in deconstruction and building green houses and to permanently affordable housing). This initiative involves public financing, public assistance, and property acquisition. It also requires public support for community infrastructure and planning.

As Curtis Bay resident and United Workers organizer Amanda Maminski has said, "We believe there are other alternatives to the proposed incinerator, non-market alternatives that will not involve poisoning the already-toxic environment within and around Curtis Bay." Free Your Voice—working alongside United Workers—has mobilized residents to turn some of the community narratives of injustice embedded in market-based fossil fuel production into sustainable socio-economic alternatives. Maminski has begun to map a collectively owned, collectively run solar plan for the community land trust. She argues, "Stopping the incinerator isn't enough. We understand that Baltimore needs electricity and that the incinerator was to create jobs and stimulate the local economy. However, we believe there are other alternatives, which will not involve poisoning the already-toxic environment within and around Curtis Bay. Another option is a solar facility on the tract of land currently owned by FMC Corporation." Maminski has presented this solar plan at several community association meetings in South Baltimore. She has also taken her proposal to city government officials like Baltimore's past-Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. Currently, city officials are in conversation with Maminski about the implementation of the solar plan. Simultaneously, Rodette Jones, who manages a community garden in Curtis Bay, is evolving a local network to promote urban agriculture. Her vision and plan is to develop curbside composting and recycling programs within food deserts. She and others argue this is a more sustainable solution to waste disposal.

Neither the Baltimore campaigns nor alternative development modes offer an immediate solution to the ongoing problems of late-industrial capitalism across urban landscapes. That said, the Free Your Voice campaign's successes and vision underscore the importance of local organizing in building a larger political moment. We cannot look toward the federal government to provide the kinds of supports necessary to create alternative economic and environmental development models. To the contrary, the federal government will bend to the power of the market. It is our work to build both a

countervailing power of resistance and an alternative development model. That is precisely what the Curtis Bay incinerator campaign has struggled to accomplish. Residents of cities like Baltimore can help lead campaigns that pressure elected officials to shut down industries that endanger community members' lives, while also investing in alternative land use and collective ownership projects that redistribute control of the means of production. In this dark moment, the Baltimore campaigns are a ray of light illuminating significant struggle and a way forward. The story in Baltimore continues to unfold. Citizens will debate and decide what a community land trust should look like, how it can obtain and control the means of production, and what alternative and green energy concretely means in this moment. The story does not end here but rather will continue to evolve as surely as we have a will that bends toward justice and survival, as we build collectively toward a more sustainable future.

Footnotes

1. Van Smith, Trash Talk, July 22, 2014.
2. Environmental Integrity Project, Air Quality Profile of Curtis Bay, Brooklyn, and Hawkins Point, Maryland. June, 2012.
3. Lawrence Brown looks at the structural divisions between the affluent, predominantly white L-shaped neighborhood cluster near downtown and the mainly impoverished Black, butterfly-shaped neighborhoods in East and West Baltimore. He also has coined the term "Baltimore apartheid," which became a popular way of describing the two Baltimores in the aftermath of the uprisings. Much of this stemmed from a combination of containment (i.e. segregation) and clearance (forced displacement) of Black and Brown residents. Multiple systems enforced and expanded Baltimore apartheid including criminal justice, real estate, public housing, finance, banking, and economic and community development. For more on Baltimore apartheid, see Lawrence Brown, "Community Health and Baltimore Apartheid: Revisiting Development, Inequity, and Tax Policy," in Baltimore Revisited: Rethinking a Right to the City (Rutgers University Press, forthcoming).
4. For more on air quality, see here.
5. Commission for Racial Justice. Toxic Waste and Race in the United States. 1987.
6. While United Workers has supported other important Black organizations across the city, such as Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle (a Black policy think tank), Tubman House (an organization formed to address issues experienced by the residents of Freddy Gray's Sandtown Winchester, and the Algebra Project (predominantly Black-led movement that uses math as an organizing tool to ensure quality education), their struggle is multiethnic and multiracial. In part, this has to do with the demographics of the community, which is 50 percent Black, 25 percent Caucasian, 23 percent Latino, and 1 percent Asian. Racial justice, to United Workers, is also about social, economic, and environmental-health justice. They argue that race equity must be one of the many frameworks we use to begin to redevelop and rebuild communities that have been systematically gutted and drained of critical resources.
7. Robert Alejandro. A blueprint for development without displacement in Baltimore. Jan 29, 2016.