For decades, the Westinghouse Corporation disposed of its toxic waste at several dump sites in Bloomington, Indiana. In the early 80s, the dumps came under the aegis of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program. While negotiations with Westinghouse over how to clean up the waste dragged on for years, EPA, in order not to upset the negotiations, kept from the public the fact that toxic air levels near the sites were more than 15 times greater than the Superfund target risk level. At the same time that EPA was secretly recommending to its staff that they wear respiratory protection whenever on-site, it was assuring the people of Bloomington that they were in no immediate danger.

This sort of behavior is symptomatic of the bigotry festering at the core of EPA. In my 25 years with EPA, I have heard countless remarks and witnessed many heartless actions denigrating environmental concerns, environmentalists, environmental organizations, and, most particularly, community environmental activists. While for the outside world, EPA puts on a face of concern and caring for the unfortunate victims of environmental pollution, the agency is permeated with contempt for these same people.

Not all EPA employees are bigoted. In the early days, in fact, many people joined the agency out of a strong environmental ethic. But 27 years later, most of the idealists are long gone, having abandoned EPA in disillusionment. They have been replaced by careerists whose environmental ethic, if it exists at all, is subordinate to their ambition. This translates into blind loyalty to the organization, regardless of whether it is right or wrong. The Russians have a word for these people; apparatchiks.

In the minds of EPA personnel, the agency represents the public interest. Since environmentalists and community activists also claim to represent the public interest, EPA employees view them, in a sense, as competitors. The instinctive reaction of these employees is to attack and eliminate the competition. Hard-core, loud-mouth bigots are a small minority, but a much larger majority passively shares many of the same views.

Congress and the White House have tended to view polluters, especially the big corporations, the way the Salvation Army might view the poor. This prejudice manifests itself in countless EPA actions: in decisions to locate hazardous-waste facilities in already heavily polluted poor neighborhoods; in Superfund cleanups that ignore community concerns in favor of giving big bucks to favored contractors; in the agency's lax and corrupt enforcement of regulations governing polluting industries; and in its suppression of employees who advocate for the public interest.

These grass-roots groups include the Times Beach Action Group, contesting EPA's incineration of dioxin-contaminated soil in Times Beach, Mo.; Mothers Organized to Stop Environmental Sins, fighting to close a hazardous-waste treatment facility in Winona, Texas; Citizens Against Toxic Exposure, fighting EPA's botched handling of the "Mt. Dioxin" Superfund site in Pensacola, Fla.; and the Ocean County Citizens for Clean Water, documenting pollution-related childhood cancers in Toms River, N.J.

A score of professional environmental organizations have evolved to assist and educate these communities. Organizations such as Communities for a Better Environment in San Francisco, Southern Organizing Committee in Atlanta, Citizens for a Better Environment in Chicago, the North Carolina Waste Awareness and Reduction Network, and the grand daddy of them all, Lois Gibbs' Center for Health, Environment and Justice (formerly Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste) in Arlington, Virginia. National organizations such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club have also actively supported the grass-roots movement.

EPA has tried to stem this tide by continually inventing new initiatives of its own. Typically these efforts succeed in little more than spawning new bureaucracies. At headquarters, we have the Complaints Resolution Staff, the State and Community Outreach Staff, the Common Sense Initiative, the Office of Environmental Justice, the Outreach/Special Projects Staff, the Community Involvement Outreach Center, the Complaints Resolution and Environmental Justice Coordinating Team, the Environmental Justice Staff, the Common Sense Initiative, and numerous other communication and outreach branches. Every EPA regional office has its own Environmental Justice Staff, Alternative Dispute Resolution staff, Community Involvement staff and so forth.

While some of these initiatives, such as the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee, do good work, most of them are more palliatives to blunt community outrage without changing the internal EPA policies that cause the problems in the first place. This, ironically, produces the need to create still more little bureaucracies.

One worthy EPA initiative is the Office of the Hazardous Waste Ombudsman, created by Congress in 1984. Robert Martin, the ombudsman, has gotten EPA regional Superfund directors to back down when citizens complained to him about the agency's policies. For example, Martin successfully intervened on behalf of the community in a dispute over a toxic dump site in Brio, Texas, in which EPA's cleanup methods would have exposed the community to more toxic chemicals than if EPA had done nothing at all. As a result of such actions, Martin is held in high esteem by community activists and is despised by the Superfund directors, who are more concerned with the prosperity of Superfund contractors than with the health of the public.

But these success stories are often short-lived. When EPA Administrator Carol Browner decided to augment the ombudsman function by creating 10 additional ombudsmen, one for each EPA region, many of the regional Superfund directors undermined the plan by insisting that the regional ombudsmen report to them rather than to Martin. Thus, EPA created a new "public outreach" initiative to kill one of the few initiatives that worked.

In a meeting last year of these regional ombudsmen, which I attended, participants bandied about disparaging and condescending remarks about environmentalists and community activists. The head of EPA's Community Involvement Outreach Center didn't interject. I'm used to hearing these kinds of put-downs at internal EPA meetings, but I was taken aback to hear them from the lips of the very people selected by EPA to investigate community complaints. These attitudes obviously affect EPA policy. I later learned from two different communities that one regional ombudsman was using his office to isolate and discredit complainants rather than to address complaints. EPA's cynicism and contempt for the public
interest is not limited to the regional offices or to the Superfund program but is part of the institutional culture of the agency. In 1997, the newspapers were full of stories about Browner's struggle to win the administration's approval of tough new air standards for ozone and particulates over the vociferous objections of industry. The impression created in the press and fostered by industry was of a zealouslyagency hell-bent on forcing these strong standards on the country regardless of the consequences. Not mentioned was the fact that the Clean Air Act of 1970 required EPA to review and, if necessary, revise these standards every five years. EPA stopped doing so in 1979. Only after it lost a lawsuit filed by the American Lung Association in 1991 and was under court order to act did EPA write the minimal standards it thought it could get away with. The only zealously shown by the agency was in using taxpayer money to fight in court for their right to disobey the law.

An EPA executive in charge of the Common Sense Initiative, founded to bring together industry, state and environmental representatives to reform EPA regulations, once commented to me—with a straight face—how much easier it would be to reach a consensus if only the environmentalists weren't involved.

EPA deals with its dismal environmental record the same way industry deals with its pollution: not by changing what it does but by papering over problems with slick PR. The only difference is that EPA uses taxpayer money to pay for it.

--by William Sanjour[1]

[1] William Sanjour has been an employee of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) since the early '70s, originally as a manager in the hazardous-waste office. In 1980, he testified before Congress on illegal EPA efforts to quash hazardous-waste regulations. Agency officials retaliated by transferring him to an office with no functions and no personnel. Since then, Sanjour has actively helped environmental and community organizations and has written numerous articles about environmental issues and EPA. In spite of persistent harassment by the agency, he continues to work in the public interest helping communities and his fellow whistleblowers. He is on the advisory board of the North Carolina Waste Awareness and Reduction Network and the National Whistleblower Center, and is a fellow of the Environmental Research Foundation. This article has not been submitted for EPA approval and does not necessarily reflect the views of the agency.

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