How can environmental justice advocates win in the '90s?

Will the techniques of the '70s work, when lobbying Congress resulted in passage of a dozen environmental laws such as the Clean Water Act? Probably not. This Congress hardly seems in a mood to pass new legislation to protect people or wildlife.

Will the techniques of the '80s work? During the '80s, activists learned to use visible (and photogenic) protests --combined with the issuance of well-researched reports—as a way of getting their story into the mainstream media. Publicity sometimes led to the collapse of bad projects (such as nuclear power plants and solid waste incinerators) or at least to compromises and improvements in bad projects.

Certainly these publicity techniques may still have some merit in particular instances, but mostly they don't work any more and therefore the '90s require something different. The '90s require the building of a large base of support among people who are being harmed or frightened or in some way screwed by "the system." And those people have to be convinced that their support will lead to some real demands for real change—not just another law that can’t (or won’t) be enforced, not just another picture on page 28 of the newspaper. As the big environmental organizations have started emulating corporate polluters in almost every way, activist-oriented people have become disgusted and have turned away from them—with good reason.

So something new is needed for winning in the '90s. As the environmental justice movement meets in Baton Rouge March 15–17 to discuss a strategy for ending the poisoning of Americans by dioxin (see REHW #479), it makes sense to think generally about campaigning in the '90s.

We have previously described a campaign style developed by Food & Water, Inc., in Walden, Vermont (see REHW #401, #419). To defeat food irradiation (the proposal to zap food with large quantities of radiation, as a preservative), Food & Water placed placards in health food stores around the country, and they mailed out hundreds of thousands of "pledge cards," asking people to send back the cards, pledging that they would take several actions to prevent the irradiation of the American food supply. The goal of the campaign was to stop food irradiation—not to "regulate" it or "control" it, but to kill it, plain and simple.

Tens of thousands of people sent back pledge cards, often with a handwritten note, such as "Great! Finally someone who is unwilling to compromise! Count me in!" Food & Water sees the American people divided into three groups: ones, twos and threes. The threes wear black hats. They are the environmental destroyers, and we all know who they are. Although they personally may be very nice people who are merely trapped inside a corporate structure that has deprived them of the freedom to make decisions based on their own consciences, from the viewpoint of campaigning for environmental justice, they are hopeless and should be ignored.

The twos are "on the fence." They are often good-hearted people who "want more information." They are not ready to act. They want to use visible (and photogenic) protests and issue well-researched reports to get their story into the mainstream media. Publicity sometimes led to the collapse of projects (such as nuclear power plants and solid waste incinerators) or at least to compromises and improvements in bad projects.

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The twos are "on the fence." They are often good-hearted people who "want more information." They are not ready to act. They want to be convinced. These people, too, are hopeless from the viewpoint of campaigning in the '90s. They too should be ignored. Talking to them or sending them information will sap precious resources and will not lead to any action. (If a two is in a position of power, such as a reporter, it may be worthwhile spending some time trying to convince him or her —but ordinary twos should be ignored by campaigners.)

 Ones are people who "get it" and are ready to take action. These are the people who mail back the pledge cards --especially those who write personal notes on the cards. These are the "troops" for a campaign. Their names go into a database. When asked, they will write a letter, make a phone call, or take some other action.

What do the troops do? In the case of food irradiation, Food & Water threatened to boycott supermarkets that said they would irradiate food on their shelves. Furthermore, Food & Water threatened to boycott particular food producers who were leaning toward adopting food irradiation, such as Frank Perdue, the chicken magnate. Food & Water asked ones to phone Mr. Perdue explaining that they were about to start a national boycott of Perdue products, starting with a picket line at their local grocery store. After a few dozen phone calls, Mr. Perdue did an about-face on food irradiation and wrote Food & Water a letter pledging to abandon irradiation plans.

This strategy has another component: purchased media. Food & Water hires advertising agencies and publicists to produce print ads and radio spots. The results are slick, professional work. The print ads appear in such places as the NEW YORK TIMES and in industry newspapers and magazines read by executives of supermarkets and food-industry trade associations. The ads are blunt and hard-hitting. The ads send several messages, in addition to whatever appears in the text: they convey that Food & Water is sophisticated, savvy, aggressive, capable, and well-heeled. They convey that a serious campaign—including punishing boycotts—has begun. And they convey a sense that there is more to come. Radio spots are mass-produced on audio tape, and are mailed to several thousand executives in the food industry, with a note saying, "You should listen to this tape. We plan to run it on radio stations in your area soon, unless you pledge to turn your back on irradiated food."

The tape explains in 30 seconds why food irradiation is dangerous and how a supermarket boycott can succeed. Naturally, the executives do listen to the tapes, and they immediately recognize that their slim profit margin is about to disappear. (Supermarkets run on a 1% to 2% profit margin, so even a modestly successful boycott can throw them into the red.) Suddenly, irradiated food doesn't look as profitable as it used to. Taking the Food & Water pledge begins to make sense.

The only food irradiation plant ever built was called Vindicator, in Florida, and as a result of Food & Water's campaign, Vindicator went bankrupt. There are now rumors of new plans to irradiate food in Illinois, but for now Food & Water has a total victory. The basic technique that worked was forcing the food industry to adopt Food & Water's position, thus giving Food & Water economic clout that it otherwise lacked.

Now Food & Water has taken on pesticides, using the same strategy. The goal is to end pesticide use on food. Not regulate it. Not reduce it. End it. Pledge cards have gone out to hundreds of thousands of people, and professionally-done placards are appearing near the check-out counters at health food stores across the country. The ones are being identified.

Simultaneously, a media campaign has begun. This summer, ads began appearing in the NEW YORK TIMES, sponsored by Food & Water and by Environmental Research Foundation. The ads were written and produced by the advertising firm Montague &; in Westport, Connecticut. The first two ads ran in the NEW YORK TIMES and didn't seem to attract much notice. The third ad ran in SUPERMARKET NEWS December 11, 1995, and it got the food industry's attention. The ad is dominated by a large black silhouette of an assault rifle. The headline says, "More people are killed by their salad." The text reads, "The assault rifle ban is a good law, and it will save hundreds of lives. But every year, literally thousands of men, women, and children die from a silent and invisible assault: Toxic pesticides on fruits and vegetables. So we've launched a nationwide campaign to alert food industry professionals and everyday consumers to the dangers of toxic pesticides. As we all work hard to promote the increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables for better health, we had better make sure that the produce is really healthy. And that means produce that is free of toxic pesticides. To join us, or for more information on what you can do right now, call 1-800-EAT-SAFE. Because telling children to eat their vegetables shouldn't be a death sentence."
The ad ran in SUPERMARKET NEWS December 11th. THE PACKER, another food industry newspaper, refused to run the ad. However, on December 18, THE PACKER wrote a news story announcing that the ad had run in SUPERMARKET NEWS, thus conveying to food industry executives the very message that the ad was intended to convey.[1] A week later THE PACKER reported that "three major produce industry associations wasted no time" in responding to the ad. THE PACKER reported that the Produce Marketing Association (PMA) had faxed the ad to all of its "retailer and service wholesaler members"—thus spreading the message further inside the industry.[2] The ad space had been purchased as a "two for one holiday special." SUPERMARKET NEWS readers complained about the ad, and the NEWS decided not to run the ad a second time; they also did not charge Food & Water for the first placement, so the ad ran free.

On January 3rd, the PMA announced they had formally requested the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to investigate Food & Water and Environmental Research Foundation for "unfair and deceptive advertising." The PMA asked the FTC to "enjoin" further dissemination of the ad, and to enter a "cease and desist order declaring the Food & Water advertisement to be unfair and deceptive." The PMA has further asked the FTC to "issue a cease and desist order to prohibit Food & Water, Inc. from representing, directly, or indirectly, that produce treated with agricultural chemicals in compliance with EPA regulations is unsafe."[3]

Michael Colby, executive director of Food & Water, responded saying, "1996 is going to be filled with new ads and efforts to tell people at the grass roots about pesticides and chemical residues." Colby promised radio ads targeted at 7 Supermarket chains—Shaw's, Grand Union, Winn-Dixie, Kroger, Hy-vee, Safeway and Albertson's. The aim is to mobilize ones to pressure their supermarket managers to offer pesticide-free (and preferably locally-grown) foods, thus putting "market forces" to work protecting human health and the environment (while helping local farmers and the local economy).

Do pesticides really kill people? And what has all this got to do with dioxin strategy? Next week.

--Peter Montague

[1] Larry Waterfield, "Ads take aim at produce supply," THE PACKER December 18, 1995, pg. 3A.
