

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #445 - Politics, Not As Usual

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Is the world headed in the right direction? Do we need merely to continue doing what we've been doing, except do it more effectively? If you think the answer is Yes, then ask yourself 3 questions:

How is it that nearly 200 years after the industrial revolution, which produced humanity's greatest period of economic expansion, the absolute number of people living in misery (both material and social) has risen exponentially?

How is it that the world's slum population has risen at a rate vastly greater than that of global population growth?

And how is it that, despite incredible technological innovations, the world now faces human-created threats more ominous than the wars, famines, epidemics and other upheavals of previous dark ages?

In sum, how is it that humanity's greatest leap forward in material prosperity has resulted in extreme social breakdown, and that our greatest period of technological and scientific achievement has come to endanger the conditions that allow life on earth?[1, pgs. 167-68]

Even in the U.S., social breakdown is accelerating. The U.S. now has the greatest disparity between rich and poor of any industrialized nation,[2] and the present Congress is working aggressively to remove the social "safety net" constructed during the previous 40 years. This can only increase people's sense of insecurity and loss of control over their lives. Insecurity is already high. For two decades, real wages have been falling. Since 1973, real hourly earnings have dropped 13.4%; and real weekly earnings have dropped 19.2%.[1, pg. 34] Even during good times, American corporations are jettisoning workers at an unprecedented pace. In 1994 corporate profits rose 11% (following on a 13% rise in 1993), yet 516,069 jobs were eliminated in 1994.[3] The average return on equity of the Fortune 500 hit an unprecedented 20.12% in the first quarter of 1995.[4] For corporations in America, things have never been better, yet a majority of Americans are working longer and harder, earning less, and living with more uncertainty.[5, pg. 3]

Both major parties in the U.S. have a common agenda. For two decades, both parties have been ceding power and resources to corporations. Corporations have been given tax breaks. They have gotten regulatory relief. They been given cheap resources by the government (minerals, timber, and land). We have opened our schools and cultural institutions to corporate propaganda. The influence of unions has been nearly eliminated. Despite all these concessions, economic well-being for most Americans continues to deteriorate.

We are told that economic and environmental deterioration are out of our hands; the "market" is doing it to us. Such views are ideology, not reality. They represent the interests of the world's most powerful economic actors, the large transnational corporations which are in the process of freeing themselves from even modest levels of social accountability.[6]

As a new pamphlet from the New Party says, "Globalization is mainly a process being carried out by the giant transnationals, among whom U.S. transnationals are the most numerous and powerful. If ordinary people and national governments are becoming powerless in the face of globalization, it is because we are granting our own corporations too much power. The market is not impersonal, it is not too big to regulate, and most of all it is not free. It is created and maintained by concentrations of corporate and governmental power."[5, pg. 28]

According to the prevailing wisdom, globalization of the economy is inevitable. No one can do anything about it. And this means that the labor force of the developed nations must compete directly with the labor force of the third world. In such a competition, production will move to areas where labor costs are low. If this arrangement promised to create a middle class in those areas (India, China,

Bangladesh, etc.), one might argue that the net global benefits outweighed the costs. But one of the key characteristics of many developing countries is extreme concentration of wealth. A handful of people typically own most of their nation's industrial, commercial, and financial enterprises, and it is these people who assemble the cheap labor to manufacture products for the developed world. Thus, under globalization (e.g., the GATT agreement), it is the poor in the rich countries who will subsidize the rich in the poor countries.[1, pg. 37] Some consumer goods will become cheaper in the rich countries, but the real cost to consumers will be loss of jobs, less pay for work, and higher taxes to support the unemployed.[1, pg. 34] In sum, if it is implemented, the GATT will impoverish and destabilize the industrialized world while at the same time cruelly ravaging the third world.[1, pg. 25]

Without going into detail, it is possible to imagine global trading arrangements that guarantee basic rights for workers and citizens in both rich and poor countries, and which safeguard the environment at the same time. But such arrangements would require people to assert a modicum of control over the behavior of corporations. As the New Party in the U.S. said recently, "If the economy is to serve the people, it needs to be controlled by the people."[5, pg. 7]

New Party? What's that?

As the name implies, the New Party is a new political party in the U.S. The Party is tiny (4300 members at the end of 1994), but during the last 2 years it has run 115 candidates and has won 77 elections (67%), all at the local level. The Party is now active in 12 states, and expanding. From the horse's mouth,[7] here is what the New Party says it stands for [verbatim]:

The New Party's Principles

The New Party believes that the social, economic, and political progress of the United States requires a democratic revolution in America --the return of power to the people. Democracy in America does not work today. The people do not rule. And they must, if we and our children are to lead lives of dignity, decency, and enjoyment.

Popular democratic organization should be encouraged and strengthened to make this peaceful revolution. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things if they are organized. Our basic purpose --reflected both in our own governance and the aspirations we have for the nation --is to make democracy work for everyone.

Our commitment to democracy comes from recognition of the moral equality of persons. People really ARE created equal, and their free deliberation is the best hope for achieving the blessings of liberty. The same recognition fuels our commitment to fairness in social life. Such moral irrelevancies as race, gender, age, country of origin or inheritance continue to determine too much of one's life chances, and this undermines the very idea of a democratic society.

We are saddened and outraged by the present corruption of our public institutions; the deliberate weakening of unions and other popular democratic organizations; the stupid and cruel economic policies that are destroying our cities and communities, increasing inequality, lowering living standards, and wrecking the earth; the special burdens this society still places on women, people of color, and children; the violence it can inflict on the rest of the world.

To promote a rebirth of freedom, equality and prosperity, we dedicate ourselves to the following:

Full public financing of elections, universal voter registration, proportional representation, free party competition.

The establishment, defense, and facilitation of worker, consumer, shareholder, and taxpayer rights to democratic self-organization.

The creation of a sustainable economy based on the responsible and reverent use of our earth's resources --taking no more than we need, replacing and reusing all that we can.

A society in which we all take seriously our responsibilities as parents, workers and citizens.

The democratization of our banking and financial system --including popular election of those charged with public stewardship of our banking system, worker-owner control over their pension assets, community-controlled alternative financial institutions.

Bill of Rights for America's Children, guaranteeing true equality of opportunity, providing equal education for all students, and achieving an adequate standard of health care, nutrition, housing, and safety.

Community-control and equitable funding of our schools, within which we seek true excellence in public education along with equal opportunity to achieve it.

Full employment, a shorter work week, and a guaranteed minimum income for all adults; a universal "social wage" to include such basic benefits as health care, child care, vacation time, and lifelong access to education and training; a systematic phase-in of comparable worth and like programs to ensure gender equity.

A progressive tax system based on the ability to pay.

Rebuilding our cities and metropolitan regions --the cornerstones of a high-wage and ecologically sustainable economy --through community-led programs of comprehensive, democratic, high-wage, and low-waste economic development.

A community in which residents, neighborhood organizations, businesses, police and local officials work cooperatively as equal partners to provide a safe and secure environment in which to live and work and study.

A reduction of national military spending to that necessary to the defense of the United States and an end to unilateral military interventions.

Trade among nations consistent with mutual improvement in living standards, reduced cross-national inequalities, and sustainable development.

In all aspects of our economy and social life, an absolute bar to discrimination based on race, gender, age, country of origin, and sexual orientation, and absolute security in reproductive rights, fundamental liberties, and privacy.

These are our principles. It will take time and experience to work out the details of sound policies and procedures based upon them, but there is no better time to start than the present. We believe that if we enunciate our principles clearly and firmly, with honesty and no double talk, the New Party will set a new standard for political behavior, and be worthy of the people of these United States. [End of verbatim quotation.]

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--Peter Montague

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[1] Sir James Goldsmith, *THE TRAP* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1994).

[2] Edward N. Wolff, *TOP HEAVY; A STUDY OF THE INCREASING INEQUALITY OF WEALTH IN AMERICA* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995).

[3] Matt Murray, "Amid record profits, companies continue to lay off employees," *WALL STREET JOURNAL* May 4, 1995, pgs. A1, A5.

[4] Roger Lowenstein, "Intrinsic Value: The '20% Club' no longer is exclusive," *WALL STREET JOURNAL* May 4, 1995, pg. C1.

[5] Juliet Schor, *A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY* [New Party Paper No. 1] (Westfield, N.J.: Open Magazine Pamphlet Series [P.O. Box 2726, Westfield, NJ 07091 USA; phone: (908) 789-9608; fax: (908) 654-3829; E-mail: [openmag@intac.com](mailto:openmag@intac.com)]), April, 1995.

[6] Walter Russell Mead, "Forward to the Past," *NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE* June 4, 1995, pgs. 48-49.

[7] "Principles," *NEW PARTY NEWS* Vol. 4 No. 1 (Winter 1995), pgs. 6-7.

Descriptor terms: political parties; democrats; republicans; new party; economy; gatt; free trade; international development; sustainable development; economics; social decay; urbanization; science; technology; income and wealth; studies; economic concentration; corporations; elections;