WEAVING A NET THAT WORKS

Chapter Thirteen

WEAVING A NET THAT WORKS

It was luncheon in a state house near Tijuana, Mexico, where the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEED) had come to meet in July 1993. The schedule called for us to march on a transfer station for hazardous waste, one of many plastic processing areas, and picket it. I asked how long the march would be. "Oh, very short," I was told. "It's only a quarter of a mile."

But the quarter of a mile was straight up. That meant to the top of a steep hill could synchronize the challenges facing the Network as it works to build a bioregional movement led by people of color for nature, social, and economic justice. The Network was formed in Albuquerque in April 1989 at a People of Color Regional Activist Dialogue on Environmental Justice initiated by the Southwest Organizing Project (now People of Color Action Network Project). At the time, organizers had sold "I won't last a month, there are too many cultural and racial differences."

They were completely wrong. By 1992 the Network embraced 70 communities organizing in 26 states, working together on such issues as pesticide used in agriculture, dangerous chemicals in the high tech industry, lead poisoning, and how these threats affect communities of color. It brought together African-American, Asian/Pacific island, Latino and Native American groups as we developed a common agenda. As an organization of organizations, SNEED has always been more than a coalition interested in becoming well-organized and persistent. It serves as a vehicle for sharing local strategies and victories as well as providing training and leadership development to its affiliates.

During its early years, the Network focused on consolidating its elected leadership (the Coordinating Council), formulating membership and working on other aspects of organizational development. It held annual gatherings: (and an odd one where Network members as a group registered to vote and planned for the next year). That year came 1993 when 2000 communities, human rights and youth organizations from Mexico's border states attended the first cross-border net work gathering. That weekend in Tijuana/San Diego, you could see the dream of a bioregional Network beginning to come true. The next few years would show just how bold the dream is, and why Richard Benjamins must call the Network "a developing national organization." In short: we're not there yet.

By March 1994, when I attended a Coordinating Council meeting, SNEED had completed eight years with accomplishments. With a staff of six in its regional headquarters in Albuquerque, it had found ways to coordinate with more than 70 groups in its U.S. states plus three Mexican states (Baja California, Chiapas and Coahuila) plus more than 15 cities and other indigenous organizations. One of the most exciting achievements in the coming years was the continuing reality of women's leadership. From its second year, the Network held a role of strong women like Rose Augustine, a Chiricahua Apache from Arizona, Patty Oliver, an African-American woman in Oakland, Texas, and obra madre, a Native American from Nevada. And, by the third year, several exceptional Asian-American women like Pia Yin, Lee and Patricia Chang of California. The addition of working-class Mexican women from the megalopolis has expanded the Network's scope of powerful female leadership. This can be seen in its revised "Major Goals Statement," which acquired a new emphasis on gender issues in 1994, and the support for women's councils in the 1995 Network meeting.

In its daily work, SNEED has taken on convoy, state and federal governments as well as industry, corporations and the military. It has won some lasting victories, starting with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). When recognition becomes the issue, SNEED has consistently made the EPA take action more seriously. The Network's EPA Accountability Campaign was originally launched on July 11, 1991, with simultaneous demonstrations at EPA regional offices in Dallas, Denver and San Francisco. Each office received a copy of SNEED's long letter detailing many aspects of EPA's interaction or cooperation with the face of environmental abuse harmful to people of color. The letter asked for several reports on EPA actions, a meeting between the EPA and the Network, and new policies to reduce past discrimination. I had the pleasure of seeing a letter delivered at an Albuquerque ceremony in which the EPA gave thanks for "Environmental Excellence" to companies for "rectifying water, as SNEED pointed out. The EPA representative had looked uncomfortable.
Eventually the EPA agreed to regulate sending hazardous waste to those states that had failed to develop adequate programs. The Network, working with the EPA, required that it develop such programs in the states. It then took legal action against the EPA, which was found to have failed to meet its obligations. The case was settled out of court, and the EPA agreed to develop the programs. The Network also worked with the states to develop their programs, and in 1977 the Network was able to secure passage of the Hazardous Waste Disposal Act, which established a national hazardous waste disposal program. The Network then worked with the states to implement the program. The Network also worked with the EPA to develop regulations for hazardous waste disposal. The Network ultimately succeeded in getting the EPA to take action, and the states were able to develop effective hazardous waste disposal programs. 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mission statement of "environmental justice" as another target. At the March 1998 Coordinating Council meeting, a 23-year-old "the López sat at the table as an equal, with no problems in presenting his idea; at the end of that meeting he announced his plan to run for City Council back home in Brownsville, Texas.

The Border Justice Campaign has been growing steadily in its efforts to pressure government and private industry to promote safe working and living conditions in areas around the twin-plant industries found in the U.S.-Mexico borderland. Since 1995, it has convened meetings of representatives from many grassroots organizations on both sides of the border to discuss strategies and collaboration, yet it's always working closely with the Mexican Action Network Against NAFTA.

Struggling for justice on both sides often coincided with the Worker Justice Campaign. Worker justice involves a broad spread of grassroots activists in Asian Immigrant Workers Unions, the San Antonio and Jena United Workers Unions, and other similar organizations. With the Networks expanding into Mexico, the relationships on the border have become increasingly central. Both campaigns at the National Council has demonstrated the close connections between environmental issues and labor struggles. Network members often say that all workers issues are environmental issues, if we are at risk in ecosystems, then our lives are at risk.

In this spirit of struggle, SNEEZ began meeting with the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCW) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The demand of the union was for the residents of Texas and Wisconsin to have the right to air and water that is safe. The answer was "no." The fight is for the right to breathe and drink clean water.

In 1997, OCW adopted a resolution recognizing that it often has the same corporate opponents as the environmental justice movement and to stop working for the same goals. Therefore, said the resolution, OCW would make every effort to form partnerships and coalitions with environmental justice groups around common goals. In February 1999, OCW and SNEEZ signed a bi-lateral agreement based on the principle of solidarity to have a "progressive agenda." In essence it said: "Let's talk before declaring war on each other."

would try to "enact democracy between communities and workers at facilities represented by OCW by agreeing to facilitate meetings at the point of controversy to permit representatives to develop a common agenda and to agree where that can't be done to mutually respect the mores of each organization."

In talks before the meetings that produced the agreement, the Network had wanted that on certain principles. It insisted that not only SNEEZ but all the environmental justice networks be present, including the Indigenous Environmental Network, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Southern Organizing Committee and North East Environmental Justice. OCW accepted this, but they agreed that they again to discuss strategies where workers belonged to OCW when dialogue was taking place between the parties and any of those groups. This SNEEZ had to refuse it would be like a union giving up the right to strike, and also SNEEZ couldn't comment its role in such an accord. But the agreement to negotiate in some of the conflicts was finally reached.

In the same meetings, OCW and the Network discussed the "just transition," a strategy to employ that often occurs when a corporation must phase out environmentally harmful production. OCW had received in August 1997 that it would support policy initiatives to accelerate extremely hazardous industries as long as displaced workers and their communities were helped during the transition to sustainable production. This set the stage for joint efforts by SNEEZ and OCW toู from Alabama to California.

For example, an indigenous tribe in California faces the closure of a facility where the workers belong to OCW. The Network and the workers went there in April 1999. The strategy of demanding a "just transition" could be applied in many situations, as Robert Smith told the Network's Coordinating Council.

The concept of "just transition" given as an example of why making the Network truly bi-national requires constant two-way translation, ranging from U.S. and Mexican environmental law and policies, to the structure of tribus in the U.S. In the U.S., there is a much more massive presence here, by the comparative wealth of the United States including the fact that Mexico lacks the same U.S. wealth of non-profit and grant-making foundations. On another level, there are differences in decision-making styles and methods to be understood, as well as assumptions of political and
In daily practice, there is the need to translate into at least English and Spanish all discussions at meetings, the minutes of meetings, conference calls, and e-mails into progress, letter, memo, and other documents. This is work with which we are familiar. It can be done. To do it through a usually bilingual, two-day meeting of plans setting up the health care program; discussing complex subjects is to feel a great deal of anxiety. The Network's effort to create genuine biocentrism. Many U.S. organizations working on environmental problems at the border do not necessarily integrate Mexican American perspectives on the relationship. As Teresa Lozada of the U.S. Border, Mexico, and other Mexican perspectives open, "We are forerunners in the decision-making process." If the Network has succeeded where others have failed, it is because of the commitment to build on relationships of mutual respect and cooperation. In December 1995 the goal was formalized as the "Teresa Principles for Democratic Organizing." during a meeting of environmental and human rights leaders, the six principles include being inclusive, doing "bottom-up" organizing, letting people speak for themselves; having a commitment to self-transformation; and creating opportunities for indigenous voices. We are not the values that we say we are struggling for.

It is crucial that Network meetings have always included a strong spiritual component. They usually end and begin with a word-body, given by an indigenous representative, as a consecration, a thought. The spiritual presence is one reason why an annual Network gathering often feels like a vibrant multi-ethnic family in action.

The need for resources, including people, has always been a critical issue for the Network. Sometimes a project has to be put on hold for lack of resources or other circumstances. This happened to the ELI-Tech Campaign, which worked on making local Corporations accountable to the communities when their factories were located in New Mexico. We also needed to find alternative funding for the campaign. The campaign was able to secure funding with the Labor Occupational Health and Safety Program at U.S. Department of Labor to train people in occupational health and safety related to the chemicals used in this program, and to focus on the environmental health and safety associated with the chemicals used in the region. The Network also engages in "Networks of Networks," by which SNEED and others help to build a qualitative organization. This provides the Network with special training, equipment, or other necessities. Today the Network has become increasingly coordinated, without losing its grassroots essence and style of work. As the Network's co-founder, Richard Moore, said in the early days, "We may be poor people, but we're professional poor people." There is no way to speak of the Network's accomplishments without reference to the Network's leadership (although he would not let me have this). Richard Moore somehow combines action and vision. His history reveals the qualities of a brilliant often bow-key organizer together with a personality that doesn't hesitate to make seemingly outrageous demands on unfeeling forces (and often winning them). Again and again, I have heard him emphasize the need to shift the Network away from masonry, "from the basement, and not to nah. He keeps his car close to the ground, in touch with people and any problems they perceive. Richard plans to step out of the leadership position in the next future, and who knows what will happen next—but whatever difficulties develop will not result from the Network. There have been many in the one-man, top-down leadership mode that fails to prioritize training and development. Richard Moore is lighter as several teams, both external and internal, and strange order in the community's struggles for social justice.

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On the western side of Albuquerque, more than 17,000 documented works of indigenous rock art as petroglyphs can be found. Native Americans held the area sacred. As a place where gods were placed for the deceased to begin their journey into the next life, it is still used by the Navajo Indians. In recognition of its significance, the Petroglyph National Monument was established in 1978.
In April 1987, Republican Senator Pete Domenici announced
his intention to push through federal legislation (Senate Bill 421) that
would fund a highway to be built through the Rincon del Oso area
that would facilitate access by real estate developers. This plan
would also benefit the Rincon del Oso, whose 6,700 acre Black
Ranch is slated for development.

Pressure against such development has been led by the Pecos
River Protection Coalition. On March 20, 1988, in conjunction
with the Earth First! protest, a group of Native American,
Chicanos, African-Americans, Asian-Pacific Americans, and
indigenous peoples formally declared that El Rincon del Oso is
an ecological and cultural treasure. The protest was led by
speakers from the four ethnic groups, who discussed the
impact of development on the area.

In response to this protest, the Rincon del Oso Association
announced its decision to withdraw its support for the
highway project. The withdrawal was met with resistance by
the developers, who threatened legal action.

It is clear today that we need to address the issue of
development and its impact on the environment and
the cultural heritage of the area. The Rincon del Oso
Association's decision to withdraw its support is a
positive step towards protecting the area. We must
continue to work towards finding a solution that
balances the needs of development with the
cultural and ecological preservation of the area.

RACISM AND THE ATTACK ON MULTICULTURALISM

Lisa Johnson, a writer, notes that racism
is a major barrier to the achievement
of multiculturalism. She argues that racism
must be confronted and addressed in order
for multiculturalism to be realized.

"Racism is a form of violence that
subordinates one group to another.
It is important to recognize that
racism is not just an individual
problem, but a systemic issue that
affects all members of society."

Lisa Johnson

A new form of resistance is emerging
that challenges the traditional ideas of
racism. This new form of resistance
recognizes the interconnectedness
between all people and the need for
an inclusive and diverse society.

"We must work towards creating
a world where all people are
valued and respected, regardless
of their race or cultural background."

Lisa Johnson

From the Zapatista movement
and concluding the right-wing move to anti-bilingual education. A political vacuum existed, with some of the key college-age people gone and a new generation not yet in motion as before. But Sergio Arroyo, one of the most experienced youth organizers, said, "Things slowed down for a while after some of us graduated, but they are picking up again." The year 1998 would bring the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as well as the 100th anniversary of the Spanish-American War, both landmarks of separatist organizations, which were to be commemorated with various educational events and protests. Speaking of the new high-school generation, many activists will tell you, "They are not stupid. They see what's wrong with the system as clearly.

From the quiet revolution of youth activism in the area, we see a transition period unfolding, with many contradictions. A transition between the mostly Reagan-回首 chuliac of massive disempowerment, and a new movement backed by an angry, creative generation with several years of activist experience seeking a language strategy. It isn't the revolution, but sometimes you can have one.

chapter twenty-nine
IRAZA & NATIONALISM . . . ?

It can be frustrating to realize how many internal contradictions that continue to swirl and create problems. 20 years ago we are still on the agenda today. Among those is the Great Nationalism Debate, which sharply divides opinion in this age of escalating division and control.

Can we really afford the conflicts within our own communities, and with other communities of color, that feed an nationalism? Can we really afford to have Chicana/o looking down on Central American and Latino students as "riff-raff?" Can we really have Chicano student organizations in southern California threatening to admit Mexican students ("They're not Chicano")? Or creating Chicano nation for those coming from Washington, D.C. instead of the Southwest, being half-white and similar "citizens?" Or holding a meeting as has happened more than once, where everybody who walks into a meeting room is given the "brown bag test" (the brownie, the beverage, the better)?

And does nationalism really make sense in an era of globalization, when it is clearer than ever that the opposition on this planet is technologically fueled by a common system that knows no borders? Doesn't that tell us that we must make a priority of learning about and building alliances with others?

To all such divisions it is time to say, "It's ours!" ("Enough already!") But we need to understand why they persist. The bitter truth is that our society, the American society, lives with various contradictions, and that is why we continue to offer hope of change even when the ideology proves untrue or false. The hope persists. Trying to understand why this is so remains elusive.

In the 1960s, the cry of "Viva la Raza!" rang out from joyously defiant youth in a key stage of the Chicano movement.
They, I thought, but we also needed to create a whole new, non-spiritual, sociological sense free of coercion by a corporate ruling class. Declaration required more than mere literacy or even the literal transcription of words into new oral traditions.

In that sense, another ideology emerged in the 1960s—disturbed by war, we called it the (cultural) revolution and revolutionary nationalism. It sought to define the need for a political and cultural transformation of society, not just recognition of Chicano history, values and culture. The idea was adopted by Chicanos activists who, for example, linked up with the Vietnamese San Jose began to study Marxism and became aware of class—not just social consciousness. A few, like the writer, joined one of the Marxist-Leninist or Weberian social studies that existed at that time out of a Chicanos of many sorts more than picking up arms. Intellectual thought was given to say deeper politics than having a Chicano period to write something that the world would have competed with, that such conditions were often accompanied by sincere conversations. We cannot forget the Chicanos who began to be revolutionary as they understood the word, and sometimes gave their lives. Everyone was searching for the way they represented.

A wave of great identity defined Chicanos as still-existing today in the heat of Raza activism. It is when truly, like 20 years ago, that such identity ideas could provide the language, overwriting itself needed for a strategy of liberation. There can be no Chicano liberation without structural social change. Most counter-cultural of all, liberation requires alliances—based on common interest with other peoples, including white allies. So we try to do it efficiently for Raza liberation, a sense of group identity and self-respect as necessary but not sufficient.

The Perils of Nationalism

If nationalism opens our minds in some ways, it also forms crucial barriers in others. Among those barriers are gender and class. For a few people in the 1960s movements, Chicano liberation also led to more or less similar resistance. Unfortunately, on this issue the revolutionary mode of nationalism may have been more radical in rhetoric but not in practice. Too often questions raised by Chicanos were dismissed by our supposedly conscientiously considered as "idealistic" or as "white women's work." We had heard about some glamorous
Nationalism in an Era of Fragmentation

Today, we find a growing number of nations engaged in social services, persistent attacks on the poor, and simmering nationalism. Many people feel extremely vulnerable. Thus, just when solidarity with others is most needed, obstacles to building it mount. People of color, too, often find themselves in a new era of their own. We look at the rest of society's race, gender, and class, divided into two camps: those who are well educated and those who are not. The result is a new form of nationalism, one that is more subtle and less obvious than before.

In his book, *Wealth and Power*, David Chavira describes various factors that explain the division between those who have experienced economic growth and those who have not. He argues that just as Mexican Americans who have experienced economic growth are more likely to support political participation, so too are those who are better educated. Chavira also notes that differences between the language, culture, and the social structure of Mexican Americans are found in Mexico, which also varies within that country. Another factor is the recently rising Mexican-American political power, which has given rise to new forms of nationalism and political participation.

Nationalism is a complex and often misunderstood phenomenon. It is not just about the preservation of national identity, but also about the struggle for power and influence. In the face of these challenges, it is essential that we remain vigilant and committed to the principles of democracy and human rights.
Building Alliances

Many people in communities of color agree on the need to build alliances, but they say, in effect, "We can't work with others until we get our own community together." It would be wrong to assume this reluctance to work with others is simply due to such reservations. It would be equally wrong to let matters rest there. Why should we have to choose between "getting our own act together" and working with others? There is much we can and should do simultaneously.

Building alliances calls for us to break down the walls of mutual prejudice that exist. To do so, we need to homogenize or strengthen. One is simply extinction; learning about each other's history, current experience and culture, beginning very young. In this historical action, we are in a small task. Students in particular need to study for such knowledge, designing courses in all the hidden histories and developing them together, not just one at a time. We also have to fight against the ignorance that encourages complete ignorance rather than unity. (For example, the way that Chinese sometimes act.)

Most important, we must work together at all levels for common causes, as a single community. There is no one group of enough allies to create for cooperation. They are in the same boat and offering to much to survive professionals such as the ever-growing poverty. It is difficult for each group to mirror each other; each carries the weight of its past. Our complex set of civil rights, attacks on affirmative action and bilingual education, and the rest of the ongoing backlash, agendas. We need to perceive communities that may not be obvious to example: African Americans sometimes act.

The Blacks have made it

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The Blacks have made it
that one group above all others. They drew the strictly drawn lines on going within, and cried for an end to it. And now at last, after all the high school boys our country of study and their deepest desire.

To meet a new adversary, we have to like each other personally. We do not need to look alike, to have the same tastes, or be from the same background. But we do need to understand each other and work together. We need to be a community that works together, and perhaps even a community for each other, before fighting can be born. In the movement we must recognize our interdependence, and the need to build an end to a fundamental, leveling strategy. In short, we can work to those two big goals of our generation: one community together and building solidarity with others. They facilitate each other.

It is not just about the organizations formed by recent years by generations of women of different ages. Women have found the way in building alliances, and their growth is one of today's most promising solutions. Think also about the multifaceted movements. We can see progress in the development of women's movements. Women are not only fighting for their interests, but also working together to create a world where women can live together. They point the way toward bigger, more meaningful solutions.

If we want to get there, it is not just about the divided women's movement. White feminism has blinded us to our own possibilities. To move this blinding, we need a revolutionary movement, a new way of thinking that has been built by working among people at the grassroots. We need a vision that understands that stagnation without progress is the root of all social injustice. We need a vision that understands the struggle for equal opportunities. We need a vision that understands the struggle for equal opportunities. We need a vision that understands the struggle for equal opportunities.

The other groups are the ones that are working our strength is probably deeper at the possibility of creating a very rich, very powerful society. No answer to that despite the many. But the answer is not in the hands of others. We are not giving up space, they continue to work, because they need to. And the question remains, whether they continue to work. And the question remains, whether they continue to work. We must not forget, the struggle for equal opportunities. We must not forget, the struggle for equal opportunities. We must not forget, the struggle for equal opportunities.