

THE WORKBOOK

20TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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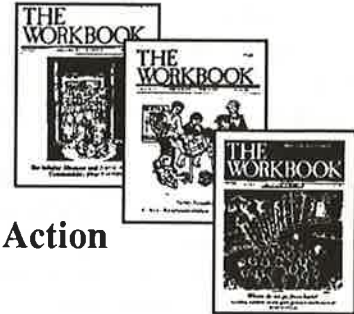
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Where do we go from here?

**Leading activists on the past, present, and future of
citizen action**



20th Anniversary Issue

The Past, Present, and Future of Citizen Action

DAVID WALLS <i>A historical review of a 20-year growth of community organizing and its place in America's tradition of citizen protest.</i>	52	DAVID CORTRIGHT <i>How citizen protest — not "peace through strength" — won the Cold War.</i>	74
MARK RITCHE <i>How cooperation between labor and agriculture, urban and rural interests have strengthened the movement for sustainable agriculture in the U.S.</i>	55	DORIE BUNTING <i>Some lessons in forming alliances in New Mexico to work for peace and justice.</i>	77
MARIA VARELA <i>The path rural communities must take to regain local control over their economy.</i>	58	JEANNE GAUNA <i>Developers and industry see New Mexico as a golden opportunity, but its people end up facing the consequences of depleted and contaminated natural resources. What they're doing to fight back.</i>	79
ROBERT D. BULLARD <i>When is a neighborhood not a neighborhood? New tactics to rewrite the history of environmental discrimination.</i>	60	LILA BIRD <i>A groundswell of Native American and low-income ethnic communities have organized to protest nuclear waste on Indian lands and other threats.</i>	80
LORI GOODMAN <i>The trouble with "accountability" for funding for Native American grassroots organizations.</i>	62	DAN BOLEF <i>"The corporate structure demands, the state and courts justify, and the regulatory bureaucracy, with its scientific-technocratic patina, rationalizes" the sacrifice of a Pennsylvania community.</i>	82
WILL COLLETTE <i>It will be the same old song in D.C. if we leave it to our "friends" on the inside.</i>	64	LARRY WILSON <i>A Kentucky town in central Appalachia ends a 15-year fight for its right to safe water.</i>	84
GALE CINCOTTA <i>How the first "bank-in" began home mortgage disclosure and the end of redlining.</i>	66	PETER MONTAGUE <i>Citizens' demands have forced a shift in some governments' thinking about risks from toxic pollutants.</i>	86
SAM ORR <i>The struggle for the rights of the "psychiatrically labeled."</i>	68	CHARLES KOMANOFF <i>Can our economy — and our self-identities — survive without the automobile? Nine ways to wean us from automobile dependence.</i>	90
KERRY COOKE <i>Working for peace in Idaho could get you called a Communist.</i>	70	PENNY NEWMAN <i>A multi-issue, multi-ethnic women's environmental justice movement is sweeping the globe with a mandate for change.</i>	93
DON HANCOCK <i>What citizens groups have learned about government and about themselves fighting for a say in the disposition of nuclear waste.</i>	72		

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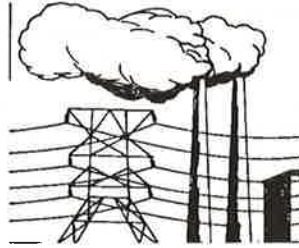
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and a newfound passion for mountaineering and wilderness. John Muir's insight that "everything in the universe is hitched to everything else" was being reborn in exhortations to "think globally, act locally," a dictum I took to heart. On Earth Day itself, in my second (and last) year teaching high school, I joined several dozen students in leafletting suburban motorists. Our handout, a broadside against the automobile, was entitled, "The Earth is a Closed Garage."

A year later, however, when I landed my first environmental job, it concerned not cars and transportation but the electric power industry. Power consumption had doubled twice in two decades, leaving no safe habitat. Coal-fired pollution was invading the Grand Canyon, oil-fired plants in New York City had created an "asthma alley," wild rivers in the West were being dammed for hydroelectricity, and the rapidly expanding nuclear power sector was contaminating air, water, and soil. A public-interest research organization in New York had obtained funding to critique the power industry's environmental record, and I was hired as a researcher-writer.

Our study, published as *The Price of Power* (with the notorious Four Corners, New Mexico, coal-fired plant on the cover), blasted the utilities for blocking pollution controls and spending more money promoting sales than researching clean energy. When it made the front page of the *New York Times*, the city hired me to help monitor its fuel and electricity supplies. In the twilight of an activist mayoral administration, we enforced sharp cuts in the sulfur content of fuel oil, exposed a risky and costly scheme to import liquefied natural gas, and joined the fight against a mammoth Con Edison power project at Storm King on the Hudson River. Although some of these battles would drag on for years, the environmental forces would win each one.

At the same time, another group of city environmental officials was crafting an ambitious plan to reduce automotive air pollution. The automakers were being prodded to clean up car exhaust, but the new emission standards, watered-down and years away, wouldn't reduce urban smog to clean air standards. A Transportation Control Plan would be required, with measures like bridge tolls, express bus lanes, and bans on taxi cruising to shrink vehicle miles driven.

Then, in October 1973, came war in the Middle East and the Arab oil embargo. Overnight, it seemed, energy conservation swept the country, particularly the oil-dependent Northeast. As the price of oil-fired electricity soared, homes and offices turned down the heat and switched off lights. Deterred by long lines for dollar-a-gallon gas, motorists stayed home or took the train. On a sunny Sunday in late October, I rode my bicycle down the middle of a broad Manhattan avenue, not a car in sight. The energy war was over, I thought, with hardly a scratch!

transportation

Undoing Automobile Dependence

by Charles Komanoff

Like many of the baby-boom generation, my environmental commitment took root in the winter of 1969-70. To the fervor leading up to Earth Day in April 1970, I brought an affinity for grassroots activism from the civil rights and antiwar movements, a mathematician's alarm over exponential growth,

My euphoria was short-lived. The recession ended in 1975-76, auto traffic surged, and power consumption too. But a powerful citizens movement sprang up to battle the electric utilities. Over the next decade, thousands of citizen-activists and "experts," myself among them, would fight utility rate increases, electric plant pollution, and nuclear power. Armed with fellowship, logic and facts, and aided by what sometimes seemed to be the nuclear industry's own death wish, we stopped hundreds of reactors and pushed nuclear power outside the political mainstream. In its place, a "level playing field" was emerging on which renewable energy and efficiency technologies such as cogeneration and low-wattage bulbs could compete with central-station plants to deliver heat and light with less environmental risk.



The Motor Vehicle Explosion

Yet efforts to control automobiles fizzled. To be sure, fuel economy improved markedly, roughly doubling from 1973 cars to late-'80s models; per-mile emissions dropped as well. But transportation control measures such as those proposed for New York were stopped cold by auto and other business interests. Underfunded mass transit and rail freight deteriorated and lost market share. After slowing down in the stagflationary '70s, suburban sprawl exploded in the roaring '80s. Propelled by tax breaks and S&L deregulation, developers covered the countryside with condos, commercial strips and shopping malls. Car and truck use — essentially the only way to negotiate this new landscape — grew apace. By 1992, annual motor vehicle miles driven had reached two and a quarter trillion, twice the level in 1970.

This volume of motor vehicle operation has proven extraordinarily damaging to the environment, to individuals and to society. Gasoline combustion is polluting the air and accelerating global warming. Petroleum extraction ruins human settlements and wildlife habitat; transporting and refining crude oil into gasoline further pollutes air, land and water. Noise from vehicle traffic disrupts and demeans daily life. Roads increasingly are built larger, wider and faster, to a scale that overruns urban communities, trashes landscapes, and diminishes open space. Vehicle crashes kill 40,000 people a year in the U.S. and cause hundreds of thousands of disabling injuries. Traffic congestion plagues drivers and

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makes non-motorized travel — cycling and walking — difficult and dangerous.

These harms translate into enormous costs for humans and the natural environment — roughly \$700 billion a year, by my estimate, in injuries and illness; lost lives, time and property value; ecosystem damage; and taxpayer costs to build roads and protect oil sources. By comparison, emissions of radiation, pollutants and heat from U.S.

electricity generation cost "only" around \$100 billion. Clearly, reducing harm from cars and trucks must rank high in our environmental and social agenda.

Yet motor vehicles play a central role in our economic activity and life. Not only are they overwhelmingly the nation's main means of transportation, they are fundamental to Americans' conception of mobility and personal autonomy. For the vast majority of citizens, economic survival is impossible, and social identity tenuous, without a car.

The car's multiple role as transportation, economic engine and myth, and the varied nature of the harms it propagates, ensure that there will be no easy solution. Here is a possible framework for thinking about, and acting against, automobile dependence.

Nine Precepts for Undoing Automobile Dependence

- THE AUTO PROBLEM IS MORE THAN "POLLUTION" — Ever since the 1973 oil embargo, environmentalists have framed the car problem largely as pollution or energy waste — understandably so, given that motor vehicles are the nation's number 1 air polluter and account for over 60 percent of oil consumption. But concern over pollution and energy has proven too small a lever to wean transportation policy and funding from the automobile. In contrast, the "social" effects of auto-dependent transport were a staple of visionary critics such as Jane Jacobs and Paul Goodman 30 years ago. The renewed emphasis on urban dysfunction, lost countryside and crash deaths in the new "auto-free" movement, and in books such as Wolfgang Sachs' *For Love of the Automobile* and James Howard Kunstler's *Geography of Nowhere*, is an encouraging sign.

- QUESTION TECHNICAL FIXES — Technological improvements have already shrunk per-mile emissions and fuel consumption, and more are in the offing. Electric cars could eliminate much automotive air and noise pollution and petroleum consumption, especially with "ultra-light hybrids" that convert fuel to electricity on-board. But this technical fix, while desirable, won't reduce crashes or slow sprawl. Citizens who care about community, wilderness, access and safety must resist the stampede to "green" cars.

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- **FULL-COST TRANSPORTATION PRICING IS KEY** — A pivotal step in utility reform was to internalize pollution costs and accident risks into the production process through tougher regulatory criteria forced by environmental activists. Once utilities faced higher costs to build and operate nuclear and coal-fired plants, alternatives such as efficiency, renewables and non-utility generation could meet utility economic criteria. Similarly, inducing individuals to drive less, and getting public officials to invest in transit and other alternatives to solo driving, will require factoring the harms caused by motor vehicles into the prices charged to buy fuels and use roads. “Full-cost pricing” can change driving behavior far more than public exhortation or well-meaning regulatory rule making.

- **GAS TAXES ARE AN ENERGY SOLUTION, NOT A TRANSPORTATION SOLUTION** — Gasoline taxes are an appropriate means of offsetting social and environmental harms from gasoline, such as oil drilling’s destructiveness, climate change from carbon dioxide emissions, and military expenditures to preserve American hegemony over Third World oil. However, most harms from driving — car crashes, road construction, traffic congestion, and tailpipe emissions — bear only a modest connection to gasoline purchases. Other pricing mechanisms, such as smog fees, weight-distance charges and congestion pricing, would be far more effective and fair at internalizing the harms from vehicle use. Although enacting them will require some technical refinement and much public education, a package of such charges could be more politically palatable and economically effective than increased gas taxes.

- **EXPOSE SUBSIDIES FOR TRAFFIC** — Motoring interests from the Big Three automakers and the oil industry to the AAA (American Automobile Association), have persuaded most Americans that motorist user fees such as gas taxes and tolls fully finance our roads. The facts prove otherwise: nationwide, motorist user fees total only around 70 cents of each dollar spent on road construction, maintenance, and administration; general taxes, primarily local property taxes, make up the difference. Exposing this taxpayer subsidy to motorists could help lay to rest the myth of the “beleaguered motorist” and undermine state and local budgetary support for highway construction and expansion.

- **UNBUNDLE CAR COSTS** — “Free” parking, a staple of the American shopping mall and work place, actually functions as a surcharge on the cost of goods, services and employment, since firms recover their parking expenditures by “bundling” parking as overhead in the price of goods, or as an automatic fringe benefit. Given a choice, some customers and workers would elect to pocket the firm’s parking cost as a cash benefit. Where transaction costs are low, “cashing out” free parking can be a strong inducement to switch from driving to carpooling, transit, walking or biking, as well as a means of increasing personal



choice. Analogous proposals to unbundle insurance costs by converting premiums from a lump-sum to a per-mile basis would also discourage unnecessary driving by reallocating rather than raising the price of car usage.


- **MAKE EQUITY PARAMOUNT** — Because driving is fundamental to mobility, and mobility essential for economic and social opportunity, proposals to charge differently for automobile use will affect virtually everyone. Since women are more threatened by violence and do more uncompensated work, particularly as caregivers, they frequently have special transportation needs. Similarly, poor people have fewer job options and little cushion to absorb motorist user fees. Accordingly, any full-cost pricing proposals must be explicit as to their effects on at-risk groups, and should go forward only if pricing revenues are rebated as tax reductions, transit improvements, and other means to ensure mobility, equity and dignity.

- **ADOPT A LONG TIME HORIZON** — America has spent 50 years painting itself into an automobile-dependent corner, through massive investment in suburbs and highways and equal disinvestment in public transportation and central cities. Creating a mixed system in which the car is merely one option among many will take several generations. Land-use changes that preserve open space and channel development into city and town centers accessible on foot, bike, and transit will not happen overnight. To minimize dislocation to individuals and businesses, the pricing measures outlined above must be phased in over many years.

- **“BIKE THE TALK”** — Perhaps because I arrived at transportation activism through bicycle advocacy, I hold a special brief for cycling as an antidote to car culture and a means of personal empowerment. It’s no coincidence that many if not most activists against motor vehicle dependence in North America and Europe are bicyclists — self-propelled transport helps sustain us against what can seem overwhelming odds. The personal triumph of daily cycling, of accomplishing with a 25-pound bike what for others requires a two-ton vehicle and a weekly fix from Exxon, demonstrates viscerally the power of alternatives to our monolithic car-centered transport system.

Yes, circumstances — distance, traffic, weather, disabilities and family responsibilities — can make it hard to cycle and necessary to drive. Perhaps car users could aim for an intermediate goal: spending as much *time* cycling (or walking) as driving. In whisking one from place to place, the automobile insidiously converts urban space and countryside alike into mere distances to be overcome (in Sachs’ phrase). Giving equal time to cycling or walking can restore balance and help renew both nature and individual autonomy.

Several years ago, I voiced to a friend my concern that undoing automobile dependence in

America would be a long, hard grind because cars and transportation are woven so deeply into the social fabric. Stopping nuclear power looked easy by comparison because "technical fixes" were making it possible to conserve energy and develop clean power without invading people's lives; whereas to rid society of car dominance, *everything* would have to change. My friend replied, with the enthusiasm of a born activist, that this was what made auto-reduction advocacy so worthwhile. 



future remember the names of the heroines of the environmental justice movement like Rose Augustine, Barbara Miller, Cora Tucker, Florence Robinson, Espy Maya, Fe Koons, Peggy Franklin, Robin and Sheila Cannon, Juana Gutierrez, Hazel Johnson, Patsy Oliver, Teresa Freeman, Kay Kiker, Diane Takvorian, Marina Ortega, Pame Kingfisher and others?

Historically, women have been in the background, quietly bringing people together, listening to concerns, helping to focus activities and actions, making sure all the various tasks are completed, ensuring everyone is included, mending hurt feelings and smoothing over points of disagreement to find common ground — in other words, organizing. It is through the efforts of women working locally that the groundswell builds until it emerges as a full blown movement for change.

From the beginning of the environmental justice movement, it has overwhelmingly been the women, often ridiculed as "hysterical housewives," who have stepped forward to confront the environmental hazards, demanding change. The women have given our movement the spark, heart, and spirit that has kept it alive and vibrant. The women have been quick to see the environment as an issue of survival, interconnected with everything around us. They have understood the link between poverty and pollution, chemical exposure and health, corporate power and the dismal quality of life in our communities.

The women leaders in our communities have understood that those with power — those making decisions that affect their lives — do not resemble us in either gender, race, class or culture. And they therefore care little about our perspectives or our concerns.

The women in the environmental justice movement have made it a movement known for its irreverence for the powerful, its willingness to take strong positions of principle, its unending persistence, and its impatience with token solutions. These women have refused to play by the old rules and have been the ones to insist that enough is enough. It has been women, for so long shut out of decisions affecting them and their children, who have stepped forward to demand a say.

(continued)

PENNY NEWMAN, a former schoolteacher, organized Concerned Neighbors in Action 15 years ago to fight for cleanup of the Stringfellow Acid Pits in Glen Avon, California. She currently co-directs the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice in southern California, which works to bring diverse groups of people together on varying issues, and she coordinates the Communities at Risk Network, a nationwide network of contaminated communities.

Recommended Reading:

Wolfgang Sachs, *For Love of the Automobile: Looking Back into the History of Our Desires*. University of California Press, 1992. (Originally published as *Die Liebe zum Automobil: ein Rückblick in die Geschichte unserer Wünsche*, 1984, Rowohlt Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg.)

James Howard Kuntsler, *the Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. Simon and Schuster, 1993.

women

Beyond the Neighborhood — Women Working for Multi-Ethnic, Multi-Issue Coalitions

by Penny Newman

In every movement for change in the United States, women have played key roles. Sometimes women have sparked change through a specific action, like Rosa Parks' simple but courageous demand for dignity in claiming a seat on the bus, sparking the civil rights movement. But most women who have provided substantial contributions to social change are never acknowledged. Their names have long been forgotten, or deliberately erased, as others have stepped forward to claim credit in our history books.

How many of us can tell the stories of Sojourner Truth? Elizabeth Cady Stanton? Florence Lusca? The Grimke Sisters? Mother Jones? Florence Reece? Ella Baker? Fanny Lou Hammer? Jessie Lopez de la Cruz? Dolores Huerta? These women and thousands of others whose names have been lost, were American leaders for social change. Will the