

Race, Gender & Class: Volume 6, Number 1, 1998 (33-50)

RGC Website: <http://www.asanet.org/Sections/rgc.htm>

## *Environmentalism and Positionality*

The Early Pesticide Campaign of the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee, 1965-71

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**Abstract:** What differentiates an environmental justice and mainstream environmental issue? Several different criteria have been suggested, including the articulation of explicit social justice concerns, as well as the subordinated nature of the affected population. In this article we explore this question and argue that positionality is one important criteria. Positionality refers to one's location within a larger social formation, and thus affects how one experiences an environmental problem. Using the early pesticide campaign (1965-71) of the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee, we show that pesticides in and of themselves do not necessarily constitute an environmental justice issue. By comparing how mainstream environmentalists and farm worker activists encountered and responded to the problem of pesticides, we demonstrate how positionality is one important consideration in the development of an environmental justice framework.

**Keywords:** Environmental justice, pesticides, positionality, United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee.

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What differentiates environmental justice and mainstream environmental issues? Is it the use of a justice framework (Capek 1993), an ability to connect environmental and social and Schill 1991), or the type of issue involved? Issue identification has been particularly important in conveying the message that the environmental concerns of communities of color and low-income groups are distinct from, and perhaps more pressing than, the concerns of the mainstream agenda. "They [mainstream environmentalists] perceive environmentalism as conservation but for us it's the survival of our communities" (Garna in Martinez 1991). "We are the real endangered species in America, people of color" (Almanza in Suro 1993). "White environmentalists have primarily been concerned with protecting trees, birds and mountains, I also support those goals, but for black folks housing and lead-paint poisoning are environmental issues..." (Stephenson in Ruffins 1990:47). While stressing the urgency of the environmental issues confronting communities of color, these quotes also suggest, both implicitly and explicitly, that such communities are concerned with *different* environmental issues than mainstream environmentalists.

This paper explores the difference between environmental justice and mainstream environmental issues. In contrast to issue identification, we suggest that *positionality* is one way of making such a distinction. Positionality refers to a person's location within the larger social formation, including one's class position, gender and sexuality, and racial identity within a particular racial formation. We believe that positionality is key to how people experience, articulate and respond to environmental issues. Thus, instead of emphasizing one's skin color or assuming a particular set of issues is inherently aligned with environmental justice, we must also consider how a person's *experiences* an environmental problem given their position in the social formation.

Activists of all sorts may be involved in the same environmental issue and share the same political perspective, but mainstream and subaltern actors hold different positions within the socioeconomic structure that, in turn, frame their struggles differently. It is important to realize that positionality does not refer to a specific person or group per se, but is a position that can be filled by any individual (Puss 1989:32). In an earlier work, Pulido argues that in both debt-for-nature swaps and pesticide exposure

...mainstream activists are involved in negotiating policy. They may stand in solidarity with the affected community, but for subaltern actors it is their *land* and their *bodies* that are at risk. This is not a minor matter in seeking to understand various forms of environmental action. This question of positionality has been lost amid charges of racism and elitism, especially by

those emphasizing issue relevancy (Pulido 1996:25-26, emphasis in original).

The concept of positionality allows us to develop a more explicitly analytical approach to defining environmental justice. For instance, many activists have argued that while mainstream environmentalists tend to focus on rural, wilderness and wildlife issues, environmental justice activists are preoccupied with urban, toxin, and workplace environmental concerns. While this is generally true, it is not entirely accurate. Consider the struggles of land-based Chicanos to protect their land and water in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico (Peña 1992, 1998, Peña and Mondragon-Valdez 1998, Peña and Gallegos 1993, and Pulido 1993, 1996). Because Chicano farmers have the oldest water rights, they have a direct material stake in protecting the watershed. Consequently, they support the conservation of forests because they understand that protecting wildlife habitat is key to watershed integrity (Peña, Martinez and McFarland 1993). These Chicano farm and ranch communities experience the land not as "wilderness" but as "homeland" (Peña 1992, 1998). It is precisely because indigenous groups experience these issues differently from mainstream activists, that they have joined in solidarity with urban communities of color fighting environmental injustices. Thus, the issue is not wilderness per se, but one's location and relationship to the land.

Such an approach requires careful attention to structures of inequality within a specific social formation. In the U.S., one of the most pronounced forms of inequality is race (Orni and Winant 1994). Because of the pervasive and fluid ways in which racism operates, people of color, as a racially-subordinated group, have different life experiences from whites. These differences include such personal things as identity and family relations, as well as more structural aspects of life, including income level and housing quality. Thus, a person's location in terms of a particular racial formation affects their experience with political or social issues. Gender and class are also important lines of difference. Because positionality emanates from the web of relations one is embedded in, it is not enough to talk about "class" in a generic sense. Rather, we must analyze those structures and conditions which render a person poor or otherwise marginalized. Is one poor due to unemployment? Insufficient access to land? Or low-wages? While movement-building requires emphasizing common experiences, such as a working-class identity, it is equally important that we consider the specifics of a person's marginalization and exploitation.

We explore these issues through a case study of pesticides. Within environmental justice circles, pesticides are routinely cited as an environmental problem of the poor, one particularly associated with Chicano/Latino farmworkers (Moses 1993; Perfecto 1992). And while it is true that Chicano/Latino farmworkers have a long history of organizing around this issue, so too do white, mainstream environmentalists. The difference, however, is one of positionality. In the first part of

this paper we examine how various mainstream environmental groups, particularly in California, approached pesticides. Mainstream environmentalists focused on protecting wilderness areas and consumers from pesticides, while ignoring the plight of farmworkers. In the second part, we focus on the early pesticide campaign of the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee (UFWOC). The UFWOC recognized the ecological and consumer implications of pesticides, but their role as a labor union led them to emphasize worker exposure. Thus, both mainstream environmentalists and farmworkers addressed the same problem, but they did so in radically different ways given their varying racial and economic positions.

### Pesticides as an Environmental Problem

Although pest control has existed as long as agriculture, the nature and extent of pest control changed dramatically with WWII and the advent of chemicals such as DDT (Dunlap 1981, 17). Since then, pesticides have become a multibillion-dollar industry (Daniels 1969, 135). They became popular not only because they required less work and ecological knowledge than alternative forms of pest control, but they also fit into our culture's attitudes towards nature and technology: control and eradication. It had yet to be proven that there were any negative consequences associated with these technological advancements.

While Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) provided a wake-up call, the Federal and state governments had already taken action on pesticides. Victoria Elenes (1991) has documented how the Federal government, beginning in the 1940s, began regulating pesticides. However, such efforts reflected the needs and desires of agribusiness and mainstream environmentalists and did not seriously consider farmworkers. Significant resources were spent ensuring pesticides were properly labeled for farmers (Federal Insecticide Act) and protecting consumers from poisonous foods (1910 Pure Food and Drug Act) (Elenes 1991, 36-38). In California, the state's Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) sought to protect consumers from pesticide residues, and the Fish and Game Code (sections 3005 and 5650) attempted to protect birds, mammals and state waters from the vagaries of pesticides. The impact of pesticides on workers was ignored in all this legislation (H. Fisher 1964). Not until 1969, in hearings on the status of migrant farmworkers, was the question of worker exposure ever raised (House of Representatives 1969). Indeed, when the UFWOC began raising the issue, California regulators denied there was a problem. The Kern County agricultural commissioner even testified that he had never heard of a pesticide injury in all of the county (Cohen v. Superior Court n.d., 10-11).

Given the invisibility of farmworkers and the nature of the early environmental movement (including its demographics), it is not surprising that a strong concern for worker rights was not expressed. Instead, environmentalists articulated a very

narrow opposition to pesticides that was removed from social justice concerns. At the national level, both the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and the Audubon Society played leading roles in seeking to regulate the use of pesticides. The creation of the EDF actually signaled a new form of environmentalism — lawyering to protect the environment — by bringing together lawyers and scientists (Rogers 1990, 53-59). Its first case was a suit against the Suffolk County Mosquito Control Commission in New York that was using DDT. EDF won the case and went on to file suits that led to the banning of DDT in the states of Michigan and Wisconsin (and eventually nationally).

Because of its concern for birds, the Audubon Society was the other group to take on pesticides. The Society, in 1959, had fought against the use of heptachlor in ant eradication efforts in the southern U.S. (Clements 1972), but they were hesitant to go on record against DDT. Indeed, Audubon rejected EDF's offer of legal services to the Society as it considered them to be too brass, given their "Sue the Bastards" strategy (Graham 1990, 231).

How conservative National Audubon's board could be . . . was shown by its reluctance to go on record against the use of DDT. Staff members since John Baker's day had been in the forefront of those clamoring to have the chemical banned, yet the board held back an official resolution for fear of offending certain well-to-do contributors who had interests in finance, industry, and agriculture and did not want to be part of what they considered a direct assault on corporate profits (Graham 1990:231-232).

The Audubon Society is an excellent example of how an environmental group may address a relevant, and seemingly environmental justice issue, but in such a way that the exploitive and racist character of the dominant agricultural system is never challenged. Consequently, environmentalists in heavily agricultural regions were even less likely to take on these issues.

Given the nascent state of modern environmentalism in the 1960s, there were not many environmentalists in the San Joaquin Valley at the time. There were, nonetheless, local chapters of the Sierra Club, including the Kern-Kaweah and the Fresno Tehupite chapters. However, reflecting the older conservation ideology, these groups were primarily concerned with outdoor recreation and the well-being of the Sierra Nevada mountains. For example, they sought to develop alternative uses and values for the Sierras, beyond logging and mining (Sierra Club 1961). Indeed, even a local grower, Jack Zaminovich, was a Sierra Club member. The fact that a member of the local ruling class belonged to the Sierra Club attests to the nonoppositional nature of environmental politics at the time in the southern San Joaquin.

A review of the Kern-Kaweah newsletter, *The Road-Runner*, indicates that pollution was not significantly discussed until May 1969. Moreover, once the *Road-*

Rimmer began discussing pesticides and pollution with greater frequency, its treatment was limited to such things as household gardening (Sierra Club 1961, 1969, 1970:6)! This is somewhat remarkable considering that these individuals were living in one of the most pesticide intensive parts of the world. However, it speaks volumes as to how political cultures may be shaped by dominant industries, and to the power of positionality in influencing how an issue is articulated.

Given their relative distance from the Valley and greater diversity, environmentalists in the San Francisco Bay area were less hesitant to question pesticide use. The San Francisco Bay Sierra Club was concerned about the spraying of pesticides, particularly DDT, in Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park (Siri 1979:34). Nevertheless, the membership was divided over the appropriate response. The differing positions illustrate important themes in the history of environmentalism, issues which the environmental justice movement explicitly seeks to counter. For instance, many members did not feel sufficiently informed on the subject and felt such decisions should be left to the experts (Siri 1979:34).

Still, others were strong proponents of pesticides and were impressed with DDT's ability to eradicate malaria (Jukes 1971). Due to these conflictive positions, the Club eventually adopted a policy that opposed pesticide use in wilderness areas, but did not call for a ban on DDT until years later (Siri 1979:35). In contrast, environmental justice activists directly challenge the notion of the "expert" and encourage confidence in the observations and experiences of nonprofessionals (Pena and Gallegos 1997). Likewise, the environmental justice movement has taken a much more aggressive stand against known carcinogens, calling for their complete elimination.

Clearly, the concerns and approach of environmentalists reflect a very narrow articulation of the environment: the environment is only where wilderness and wildlife reside. They were incapable of an oppositional politics that would allow them to make the connections between agribusiness, the state, environmental degradation, and highly-exploited workers. That they could not do so was partly a reflection of who they were (virtually all white, college-educated and largely male), where they lived, and a limited political consciousness. For farmworkers, their take on pesticides was radically different, as it was informed by their working class status and subordinated position within a racialized division of labor.

### Pesticides as an Environmental Justice Issue

Because California agriculture has long depended on a large pool of migratory, racially-defined labor, farmworkers have constituted one of the most exploited and oppressed members of the working class. In addition to the problems

of insufficient work, low wages, an anti-union climate, violent political repression, lack of medical benefits, and harsh working conditions, farmworkers also have had to deal with pesticide exposure. Although there has been a long history of farmworker organizing, the UFWOC was one of the most successful organizing efforts to date, and dealt specifically with pesticides. In 1970 California farmworkers won the right to unionize and their first collective bargaining agreement included an unprecedented Health and Safety Clause. This victory was a huge step toward democratizing pesticide management and protecting workers, consumers and the environment. However, as a labor union, the UFWOC did not privilege pesticides or consider the problem outside of its political economic context. Instead, pesticides were treated as a workplace issue, and thus organizers sought to control it not only through the union contract, but more importantly, as part of the larger process of increasing worker power.

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta began organizing in the early 1960s in the southern San Joaquin Valley. At that time, workers knew pesticides impacted them, but they did not always understand exactly how, or the extensive nature of the problem (E. Medina 1991). During the UFWOC's first major strike, in 1965, a make-shift clinic was established. Through the clinic, Union leaders and health care workers realized the pervasive and collective nature of the pesticide problem (Segur 1991). The Union felt the problem was so severe that its control should be a union demand. Accordingly, the UFWOC created a Health and Safety Committee to advise the Union in the development of a strong health and safety clause to be included in the contract (A. Medina 1991, Moses 1991, Moses and Padilla 1966).

In addition to the union contract, the UFWOC embarked on a legal strategy to control pesticide use. The Union's goal was twofold: to control pesticide use and to harass the growers as part of a larger organizing strategy. Pesticides were identified as a key problem facing farmworkers and became central to the Union's struggle (A. Medina 1991). Ralph Abascal, a California Rural Legal Assistance lawyer, was assigned the task of trying to reform pesticide use through legislation and litigation (Abascal 1991, Averbuck 1991).

Such efforts included gaining public access to pesticide records (Atwood Aviation, Inc., et al v. C. Seldon Morley; Uribe v. Howie; Harner 1969; Ayala de Sifuentes 1972); banning the use of specific pesticides, such as DDT and organophosphates on both the national and state levels (Lopez et al. 1969; Ponce v. Fielder et al, nd.); forcing the director of the CFDA to enforce the law (Solis and Torres v. Fielder, nd); and transferring pesticide regulation from the California Department of Food and Agriculture to the Department of Public Health (Huerta 1991, Alvarez 1973). In short, the UFWOC launched a multi-pronged strategy against pesticides and the growers. Here we recount only the activities centering around the boycott, negotiations, and contract.

### The Boycott

Because the UFWOC represented relatively powerless workers, the Union used the consumer boycott to pressure the growers into coming to the bargaining table. Starting in 1968, pesticides became more central to the boycott. The objective was not only to raise consciousness about the problems associated with pesticides, but also to further tarnish the image of growers, who were portrayed as ruthlessly poisoning workers, the environment, and consumers.

Marion Moses, in addition to educating organizers, contacted influential individuals including Ralph Nader, Charles Wurster (ED), and Tony Mazocchi (OI, Chemical and Atomic Workers), to help get the word out. This outreach brought to the public's attention the issue of pesticides and farm labor. As one organizer explained, "Now we had two messages with which to hook people: First, the exploitation of farmworkers in general, but if that didn't appeal to them, they could then appeal to either their ecological concerns, or self-preservation" (E. Medina 1991).

The Delano office kept organizers abreast of the pesticide strategy by sending frequent fliers and memos. These included updates on legal efforts to restrict pesticide use (Legal Department 1968a and b; Legal Office 1969, UFWOC 1969), results of laboratory residue tests (Legal Office 1969), and the amount of chemicals used (Farnsworth 1971). They also sent 'propaganda' and 'strategy' sheets designed to help organizers attract attention to *la causa*. For example, one sheet, entitled "Safeaway Escalation — Possible Techniques" listed a number of ways to pressure Safeaway into not buying grapes. Ideas included: the use of petitions and mail cards, picketing, sit-ins, fasts, sanitary lawsuits, and phone harassment (Board Members 1969). As part of any campaign, it was suggested that organizers prepare leaflets with a skull and crossbones and "choice tidbits" of pesticide injurers (Brown 1969). Another alternative was to test a bunch of grapes for DDT residues and then publicize the findings. Finally, one could find a consumer, preferably a nursing mother, willing to sue a supermarket. The instructions stated, "Find a local volunteer lawyer who will be willing to file the suit. When you find the hip lawyer and the hip consumer — call Delano for further information" (Brown 1969).

Organizers made presentations to a variety of groups interested in the boycott. Information was also available through the Union's newspaper, *El Malcriado*. Using these methods, the UFWOC attracted a large and diverse group of supporters who contributed in various ways, including monetary donations, boycotting grapes, picketing, or becoming full-time volunteers. The net effect was to create sufficient pressure on growers to bring them to the table.

### Negotiations

In January 1969, Chavez sent a letter to growers explaining that the Union was at a juncture: the UFWOC would intensify the boycott unless the growers began

talks. As part of the invitation, the UFWOC made it clear that pesticide safety was non-negotiable.

There is one critical issue of such overriding importance that it demands immediate attention, even if other labor relations problems have to wait. I mean the harmful effects of spraying grapes with pesticide, or economic poisons, as they are called. We have recently become more aware of this problem through an increasing number of cases coming into our clinic.

We will not tolerate the systematic poisoning of our people. Even if we cannot get together on other problems, we will be damned — and we should be — if we will permit human beings to sustain permanent damage to their health from economic poisons.

We are willing to meet with your representative on the sole issue of pesticides, even if you are not prepared to begin full-scale collective bargaining at present. These talks could go on even as we pursue our final aim of a fair agreement (Chavez 1969a).

The growers did not respond to the letter, so the UFWOC escalated the boycott. Nonetheless, a small group of growers who were hard hit by the boycott initiated secret negotiations with the UFWOC on June 13, 1969. The talks covered several matters, including wages, the hiring hall, and the successor clause, but pesticides were the central issue. Talks collapsed on July 3, but the pesticide discussion illustrates the differing ways growers and workers defined the issues.

A major stumbling block in negotiations was how the UFWOC would distinguish between union and nonunion grapes. The growers insisted, correctly, that even if the boycott ceased, the public was still left with the image of poisonous grapes. While the UFWOC argued that the Union label would be a sign of safe grapes, the mediator countered that given the fact that it was July, the pesticides had already been applied to the coming fall crop, so how could they be declared 'clean' (UFWOC 1969b)? This problem was never solved. The organizers saw the pesticide issue as an urgent health and safety concern, while the growers focused on the marketing dilemmas posed by the organizing struggle and boycott. Positionality asserted its power over the participants in the negotiations.

Another difficulty was the double role of pesticides as both a weapon and a bargaining chip. Obviously, growers wanted the pesticide campaign stopped, and they sought an injunction against the boycott. If successful, it would devastate the UFWOC, because as Huerta pointed out, the Union only had three weapons: the strike, the boycott, and the pesticide campaign (UFWOC 1969b.3). If the injunction was successful, they would be left with only the pesticide campaign. How does one wage

a pesticide campaign against nonunion grapes, while trying to convince the public that union grapes are 'clean' when they were grown under nonunion conditions?

Another issue was the contrasting ways pesticides were defined. According to Union notes, 'Kovakovich [a grower] wanted to make clear that their concern was regarding the public aspects of the pesticide program: 'we can set aside the effect on the worker'" (in UFWOC 1969b:2). Huerta responded that their prime concern was with the worker, and that the impact of pesticides cannot be "set aside" (UFWOC 1969b). The growers' objective was to stop the pesticide campaign in order to preserve the name of grapes. For their part, they agreed to follow all Federal and State laws regarding pesticides. Moreover, they expressed a desire for the UFWOC and growers to work together to pressure the government to better address the problem.

Even though the growers certainly had come a long way in their attitude towards pesticide regulation, increased government regulation was not what the Union wanted. Huerta insisted that the government could not be relied upon to protect workers from pesticides. The Union sought stronger contractual language which would both protect workers and give them a greater role in pesticide management, but growers balked at the idea of greater worker participation. "You just can't have a committee that is emotionally involved determine that. It is not qualified. Those decisions should be made by experts to protect the workers and if regulations are not strong enough, the laws should be changed" (Pacific Business 1971).

It is true that most such committees limit themselves to ensuring the enforcement of Federal and state regulations. Indeed, it has often been rank and file uprisings, rather than union leadership which have pursued health and safety improvements, underscoring just how radical the UFWOC's demands were.

Upon conclusion of the talks both sides dug in their heels. Growers hired a public relations firm that counseled a "no compromise" strategy (Taylor 1969), while the UFWOC capitalized on a series of hearings on the status of migrant farmworkers convened by Senator Mondale. It was at these hearings that, for the first time, the American public became aware of the plight of farmworkers, including their pesticide problems.

### The Contract

Despite this impasse, one wine grape grower, Perelli-Minetti & Sons, signed with the Union. This was an historic contract which contained an impressive health and safety clause (*El Malcriado* nd). However, the wine grape growers were not the objective: table grape growers were. The boycott continued through the winter, and in the spring of 1970 the UFWOC experienced another victory, this time with Coachella table grape grower Lionel Steinberg and David Freeman (Chavez and Steinberg 1970). By this time, the economic pressure had become so severe that

growers started signing sporadically. As more growers signed there was greater pressure on the others to do so. In mid-July a large group of growers agreed to talks and on July 30, twenty-six major growers signed. This was an historic event, with over 800 people present at the signing. Although 30 percent of the grape crop was not yet covered by the contract, the UFWOC knew it was only a matter of time. Their staunchest opponents, the southern San Joaquin growers, had signed.

The contract provided workers with only a nickel pay raise, but made substantial non-monetary gains, including a health and welfare program, a social development fund, seniority, leave of absence, vacation pay, and the Health and Safety Clause. Not only did the Clause strive to protect workers from pesticide abuses; it also gave workers access to information, a voice in the pesticide application process, and the right to disagree with management by refusing to engage in work they deemed dangerous. Following is the text of the 1970 Clause:

### Health and Safety

*Company and the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO recognize the need to protect and conserve human life, water, soil and vegetation. Economic poisons, when used incorrectly by growers in agriculture in any crop, create grave dangers to farm workers and to consumers, disrupt the earth's ecology, [and] do not properly serve the farmers. In the hope of developing, with the help of Federal, State and University consultants, new imaginative and creative approaches to the problem of conserving our natural resources, and in hope of taking progressive steps to protect the health of farm workers, and consumers. Company and Union agree that the subject of economic poisons is a necessary and desirable subject for this collective bargaining agreement.*

*Company and Union agree as Follows:*

*A - Union shall cause to be formed a Health and Safety Committee (the 'Committee') comprised of workers' representatives. Members of the Committee shall have free access to all records concerning the use of economic poisons. The Committee shall participate in the formulation of rules and practices relating to the health and safety of workers including, but not limited to, the following: use of economic poisons; the use of garments, materials, tools and equipment as they may affect the health and safety of the workers; and sanitation conditions.*

*B - DDT, ALDRIN, DIELDRIN, ENDRIN, PARATHION, TEPP, and other economic poisons which are extremely dangerous to farm workers, consumers and the environment, shall not be used.*

C - The Committee shall approve the use of organophosphate [sic]. Company will notify Committee at least seven (7) days prior to the application of organophosphate material. Such notice shall contain the information set forth in paragraph D, below. The Committee shall determine the length of time during which farm workers will not be permitted to enter a sprayed field following the application of an organophosphate pesticide. One baseline cholinesterase test and other additional tests shall be taken at the expense of Company when organophosphates are used. The results of said tests shall be given to Committee immediately, and, if requested, to an authorized Union representative.

D - The following records shall be kept and made available to the Committee and to any further authorized Union representative:

- 1) A plan showing the size and location of fields and a list of the crops being grown.
- 2) Pesticides and economic poisons used including brand names plus active ingredients, registration number on the label and manufacturer's batch or lot number.
  - a) Dates and time applied or to be applied
  - b) Location of crops or plants treated or to be treated
  - c) Amount of each application
  - d) Formula
  - e) Method of application
  - f) Person who applied the pesticide
  - g) Date of harvest

E - No worker under this agreement will be required to work when in good faith he believes that to do so would immediately endanger his health or safety.

F - There shall be adequate toilet facilities, separate for men and women in the field readily accessible to workers, that will be maintained at the ratio of one for every forty workers or fraction thereof.

G - Each place where there is work being performed shall be provided with suitable, cool, potable, drinking water convenient to workers. Individual paper drinking cups shall be provided.

H - Workers will have two (2) rest periods of ten (10) minutes which insofar as practical shall be in the middle of each work period.

I - Tools and equipment and protective garments necessary to perform the

work and/or to safeguard the health of or to prevent injury to a worker's person shall be provided, maintained and paid for by company, such as, but not limited to: grape knives, rain gear, gloves, pruning shears, and umbrella for tractor drivers. Workers shall be responsible for returning all such equipment that was checked out to them, but shall not be responsible for breakage.

J - Adequate first aid supplies shall be provided and kept in clean and sanitary dust proof containers.

The 1970 clause represented a significant improvement over previous versions in several ways. For one, the H & S committee was comprised solely of workers, whereas previously it was divided between management and labor. It should also be pointed out that access to pesticide information, while a seemingly small matter, had previously been denied to workers, and had been the subject of several lawsuits. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this information to the well-being of farmworkers. The primary way workers were poisoned is by direct contact with foliage. Thus, their exposure is both a function of the type of work they do and the pesticide treatment protocols (i.e., how frequently, how frequently, and how much the field had been sprayed). A major source of poisoning was entering a field that had recently been treated — but to refuse entry was to risk one's job. A contrasting group of workers were pesticide applicators, usually crop-dusters. These workers were also members of the working class, but because of their place within a racialized division of labor, they were not as vulnerable as farmworkers. Because they were higher-status workers, and usually white and male, pesticide applicators were not only well-trained (a 'luxury' not afforded farmworkers), but had access to protective equipment and more control over their activities.

A final element of the contract worth noting is the banning of particular 'economic poisons.' Section B explicitly prohibits the use of highly dangerous pesticides. The thinking was that such chemicals cannot safely be used. This was especially the case with DDT, which was not acutely toxic but manifested itself over a long period of time. As a result of *Silent Spring*, the UFWOC, and other environmentalists, DDT was eventually banned in the U.S. It was, however, replaced with organophosphates, which, while they quickly dissipate, are acutely toxic (see Wright 1990). While the UFWOC has continued fighting against organophosphates, most environmental organizations only deal with pesticides as a consumer residue issue, thinking the pesticide problem has been solved. The shift from hydrocarbon-based pesticides like DDT to organophosphates was in part the result of the pressure by environmentalists to eliminate pesticide residues to increase food purity for consumers. This, however, did not resolve the issue of the more acutely toxic nature of organophosphates which were many times more toxic at the point of production compared to the older, more long-lived, hydrocarbon-based poisons.

## Conclusion

The discourse on environmental justice has emphasized the importance of issue identification and race in defining environmental justice issues. While the environmental problems of people of color are unique and constitute the basis of an oppositional politics, we believe such a framework must be complemented by greater attention to the specific forces producing our complex political landscape of today. The concept of positionality allows us to develop a more nuanced analysis of how a person experiences marginalization, and how they might respond to it. Positionality requires that our analysis draw on more than race, because race is produced and experienced in mediation with other identities and processes (Orni and Wirant 1994).

Thus, farmworkers' exploitation and oppression cannot be understood solely as a function of race, but rather at the intersection of their racial identity and class position. In turn, their status as farmworkers cannot be understood outside growers' ideological use of a racialized set of stereotypes and prejudices to justify a particular racialized division of labor. Because farmworkers experienced pesticides at the confluences of these forces, they responded by making pesticides part of their struggle for worker rights and Chicano power.

As we have shown, neither one's race nor the issue itself is sufficient to define an environmental justice struggle. Both farm labor organizers and environmentalists recognized pesticides as an ecological issue. The UFWOC focused on the effects of pesticides on workers at the point of production, while voicing concern for food safety and wildlife. In contrast, white middle class environmentalists, far removed from direct contact in the fields, focused on the more traditional conservationist concerns with wildlife, habitat, and later, food residue. Privileged in their socioeconomic status and political position, environmentalists articulated an approach to pesticide use that turned a blind eye to the problems facing workers at the point of production.

Divisions within the mainstream environmental movement over how to respond to pesticides captures yet another dimension of positionality. Recall that the San Francisco Bay Sierra Club felt that the pesticide-use issue should be left to the scientific experts. The UFWOC, representing workers in direct contact with the toxins, was more critical of experts while embracing the participation of workers in controlling the use of pesticides. It is easier for a person who is not rooted in a particular social relation to take on an abstract opposition to pesticides without questioning the larger social, political, and economic inequities framing their use.

We suggest that the position of farmworkers, including their role as a subordinated racial group as well as their direct contact with pesticides, led them to articulate a more radical perspective that posed serious challenges to the structures of

domination. When you are facing daily threats to your health and safety, it is difficult to embrace the 'wait and see what the experts say' attitude. The more radical perspective of the farmworkers, who advocated ideals like workplace democracy, worker self-management, and workers' control of production, was not solely the result of the workers' racial-ethnic identity, but rather resulted from a racialized division of labor, and from their direct lived experience at the point of production. In this manner, the positionality of the farmworkers, growers, and environmentalists played a major role in defining their distinct approaches to a single environmental issue.

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**Race, Gender & Class:** Volume 6, Number 1, 1998 (51-69)  
**RGC website:** <http://www.asanet.org/Sections/rgc.htm>

## From Margin to Center: Environmental Justice and Social Unionism as Sites for Intermovement Solidarity

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 SESSION BETWEEN RACE,  
 GENDER & CLASS (RGC) AND  
 ENVIRONMENT & TECHNOLOGY  
 (E & T) SECTIONS ON

## Environmental Justice

AT THE  
 1999 AND 2000  
 AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL  
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**Abstract:** In this comparative analysis of labor-environmental alliances it is argued that various forms of unionism and environmentalism help or hinder efforts to transcend narrow sectoral interests. Movement organizations that parallel, and sometimes emulate, grassroots organization tactics, and discursive practices are better equipped to engage intermovement, oppositional alliances. This is evident in each of the periods where intermovement solidarity persisted, the efforts to build alliances between the two movements during the early 1970s can be located in the strategies of a handful of social unions and an even smaller group of environmental groups with concerns for social justice and full employment. Secondly, active grassroots mobilizations during the late 1970s and 1980s in both movements transformed the character of several leading social movement organizations. Finally, the broad alliance that challenged NAFTA makes evident that key sources of intermovement solidarity stem from the way in which larger movement organizations responded to, or were redefined by these movements from below, i.e. social movement unionism and environmental justice, respectively.

**Keywords:** Environmental Movement, Labor Movement, NAFTA

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The author thanks Howard Kimeldorf, Dorceta Taylor, Ian Robinson, and RGC reviewers for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

In reference to the paper's title, I am grateful for, and inspired by bell hooks' (1984) examination of the historical movement of feminist theory from "margin to center."