

## Penn Loh: EJ and TJ

Interview by B. Jesse Clarke

**P**enn Loh is a professor at Tufts University's Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. From 1996 to 2009, he served in various roles, including executive director (since 1999) at Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE), a Roxbury-based environmental justice group. He holds an M.S. from the University of California at Berkeley and a B.S. from MIT. Before joining ACE, he was research associate at the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security in Oakland, California.

**Jesse Clarke: What was your involvement with environmental justice in the early '90s when you were at the University of California Berkeley?**

**Penn Loh:** I went to UC Berkeley because I realized that much of the work of electrical engineers (I had an undergraduate degree in that field) at that time was really in the military industrial complex. It seemed like the profession, rather than making life better for people, was largely involved in projects supporting war research. So, I started down a different track.

At that time, I saw environment as a secondary concern to other social justice issues. But at U.C. Berkeley I met folks who had just attended the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington D.C. I got involved with that student group and also took a class with Carl Anthony. Suddenly, light bulbs went off and I realized, "This is what I can do to contribute to something positive and which goes real deep with respect to my own social justice commitment!"

**Clarke: Is that why you got a job with ACE when you got back to Boston?**

**Loh:** Yes, I jumped at the opportunity to join an organization that was just getting off the ground. It was founded by two lawyers who had been inspired by peo-

ple like Luke Cole. We were trying to figure out how we could bring legal and technical assistance to grassroots communities and support bottom-up movement building for social change.

Our early issues dealt with asthma and air pollution—specifically diesel pollution.

We looked at the work WE ACT was doing in New York City and at what the Bus Riders' Union was doing in Los Angeles to get a clean bus fleet and we recognized that we were facing exactly the same issues in Boston. So initially, we got into transportation issues from an environmental health standpoint. As we started to deepen our organizing in this area, we realized that we had tapped into a much bigger issue. The riders and folks in the community who relied on these buses every day didn't see the diesel pollution issue as separate from all the other issues with transit. There was extreme pent up anger and frustration at the transit system. The bus riders felt like they were part of a second class system, as compared to the subways, which Boston touts as being world class.

**Clarke: Can you talk a little more about the equity dimension of the transportation system and just how that came to the fore in terms of the politics around it?**

**Loh:** We had done some very focused campaigning



around clean buses and ACE was facilitating a Clean Buses for Boston Coalition that included a number of community groups, our youth, and some environmental groups. We targeted the transit authority to persuade them to use alternative fuel bus technologies as they replaced their aging fleet but they didn't much want to talk to us.

In 1997-98, we held a series of community forums over a five-month period attended by about 500 people. We invited the transit authorities and were able to get their middle management to come out to listen to the people.

People talked about a variety of issues of which two clearly stood out: (1) inadequate and poor transit service and (2) disrespect in terms of how the system treated people in their communities. There was a strong sense of the inequity in the way resources were dedicated to the bus rail and commuter rail systems but there was no organized voice of transit riders, particularly in the transit-dependent low-income and communities of color. We eventually launched the T Riders' Union—inspired by the Bus Riders' Union.

**Clarke: A decade later, how has the struggle to equalize transportation investment and access for transit-dependent low-income communities and people-of-color communities been progressing in Boston?**

Loh: After about three years of intensive advocacy and organizing, we succeeded in getting the public commitment from the transit authority to switch the fleet over. So, now almost the entire fleet of thousand buses serving Eastern Massachusetts is being converted to cleaner alternatives. We're very proud of that. Also, we didn't realize it then but we had really started a movement for transit justice. The T Riders' Union has really grown and become the voice of low-income riders in the area.

The biggest battles we've had to fight since 2000 are the fare increases because of the structural deficits built into our transit system. We've had a cycle of 25-30 percent fare increases across the board, every couple of years since 2000. It's been quite a struggle to try to keep the fares affordable in a way that also ensures no service cuts.

Over the years, we've come to realize that we need broader and deeper solutions. So, about four years ago, we started to advance our own systemic solutions to dealing with the structural deficits. One of our suggestions—which is now part of the mainstream discussion—was to look at how to relieve our transit authority of an inordinate amount of debt on projects, such as the “Big Dig” highway project [a freeway tunnel under the Boston harbor].

**Clarke: The big debt.**

Loh: There was a bunch of projects that the T originally was not paying the debt on but which became a part of the general obligation of the state as a result of its taking on the Big Dig project. The debt was switched over to the T in 2000 when there was a restructuring in finances and what was already a good amount of debt on projects they had wanted to build ballooned out of control to the point where up to 30 percent of the operating budget now is servicing debt.

We knew that you couldn't just take the debt off the T's books, but would have to identify new revenue streams. In the last gubernatorial election in 2006, we were able to advance the idea that we need to find new revenues. Two years ago, the Governor had suggested something that we backed very strongly—it was to increase the gas tax, which had not kept pace with inflation and had not been increased since the early 1990s.

Photo:  
Youth on ACE's “Anti-Idling March” handing out “idling tickets” to drivers.

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Clarke: Your description of the debt burden in Boston reminds me of the situation in the global south—people are saddled with huge debt obligations for big wasteful projects built by politically connected contractors. The result is that social spending and needed services are gobbled up by “servicing” the debt. On a global level, a lot of the countries that are at the bottom of the carbon sink are trying to win cancellation of such debt to allow for investment in clean energy. It’s interesting that your demands in Boston parallel theirs.

Loh: With broadening recognition that climate change is something we can’t ignore we are seeing a new framing—that a green economy or a clean energy economy is one of the ways of addressing the climate change issue. What we’ve found at ACE and our work in transit is that to really get to environmental justice, we need to figure out how to build the sustainable infrastructure that can support community health and quality of environment, as well as decent livelihoods.

Clarke: I’m interested in how you are working on the problem of getting equity into green economics. We have a report here from the Applied Research Center (ARC) showing that the percentage of low-income and people of color

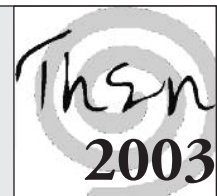
and women actually employed in the green energy economy are so far below the actual percentages of the population that heavy investment in the green economy might even exacerbate economic inequality in some situations. How are you framing equity into the climate change debate so that it will move towards climate justice?

Loh: I think one of the things that really helped us in talking about to green jobs and the green economy was being rooted in the environmental justice framework, which gave us a good way to really analyze what was going on. We never bought into the notion that it’s just about getting a fair share of jobs, or that somehow the economy is going to fix itself in terms of the sustainability issues and that it’s going to create all kinds of new industries. Our critique goes much deeper, which is to say that the environmental injustices that we’ve been fighting and struggling against are caused by the same factors in the economy that have generated these obscene inequalities in wealth. Environmental injustice has always been connected to economic injustice in that respect. But we’re saying that we have a real role to play in defining what a green economy ought to look like. We don’t think that sustainability and justice can be separated; that you can achieve one without the other.

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“We Must All be Accountable  
in a Grassroots Movement”

## Accountability

By Penn Loh



In 1992, I was a twenty-something graduate student at UC Berkeley who had just joined a student of color environmental justice group, Nindakin, which was an affiliate of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice. As a member, I often felt out of place. Not only was I not in my home community (Boston), but I was at an elite university with all its privileges. As a group, we also struggled over our role, particularly one question: Are we fighting our own oppression within the university or are we using our resources to support local community groups? More than a decade later, I work for a community-based EJ group, Alter-

natives for Community & Environment (ACE), and those questions persist. During my seven years at ACE, the group has grown from an intermediary organization providing legal and technical support to grassroots groups in Boston to a group that is also organizing communities directly, nurturing youth leadership, building coalitions, and planning to establish a grassroots membership. We are neither a grassroots group nor an intermediary; we are both. I realize now that the divide between “grassroots” and “intermediary” is just a reflection of the root injustices—racism, classism, sexism—that we are fighting against. An intermediary is an intermediary

because it has some form of power that the grassroots doesn’t and feels some responsibility to share it. For me, the guiding light for resolving these tensions comes from Dana Alston’s words at the First People of Color Environmental Justice Leadership Summit: “We Speak for Ourselves.” In that statement, she challenged us to build a movement led by those most affected—a goal that is easy to say, but hard to do. If we are a movement led by people struggling locally, then how do we build power and use it to achieve broader change regionally, nationally, and internationally?

At ACE, through an ongoing study group

ACE was one of the founding partners in Community Labor United. About three years ago, we started to work with them on building a green justice coalition on a platform with multiple demands: (1) to see measures and policies enacted that would really reduce our greenhouse gas emissions within the state; (2) to make sure that any public investment in resources for greenhouse gas emissions reductions—particularly in the areas of energy efficiency and energy conservation where people can save money—be available and accessible to lower income communities and communities of color; (3) to have all of the investment in policy done in a way that actually creates decent jobs that are accessible to our communities, especially in places where there's been chronic underemployment and unemployment.

The Green Justice Coalition now includes more than 35 entities across the state. We had a pretty good impact on our state's evolving energy efficiency policy over the last year. Massachusetts now has in place a three-year statewide energy efficiency plan that the utilities are responsible for implementing. By some accounts, it's the most ambitious energy-saving goal set by any state in the nation. We're going to see a ramping up of the investment

in energy efficiency from about \$150 million a year to over \$600 million a year in the next three years.

**Clarke: Any final comments—for the benefit of the younger generations—on the choices you made at the start of your career to leave the military-industrial complex and join the “nonprofit-industrial complex”?**

**Loh:** I think we should be clearheaded about the fact that the nonprofit sector is not sufficiently tooled up to serve as a proxy for a social justice movement or a mass movement. We need to pilot a lot of other structures of organizing and in particular, of building our own models of economic democracy. In the context of creating a green economy we need to think about creating sustainable economic activity that's also controlled by our communities. The Green Justice Coalition, ACE, and a few other groups are planning to launch our own community-owned weatherization company. We are trying to figure out how we can actively take ownership and have worker-owned wealth and revenue streams for some of our nonprofits. It's been a really exciting process and I think a lot of us need to start experimenting with it and figuring out how to do it. ■

*B. Jesse Clarke is the editor of Race, Poverty & the Environment.*

with our youth, staff, board, and community leaders, we've started to tackle these questions. We agreed that a “movement” has lots of people, each with a shared analysis of what's wrong. Like flowing streams of water, we're headed in the same direction, but not necessarily in a coordinated manner. A movement hits critical mass when people can identify with it and take part, yet without necessarily belonging to a group. We concluded that the EJ Movement is still in its infancy, not yet a mass movement but with the potential to be one. With the help of the Environmental and Economic Justice Project (which is based out of the organizing group AGENDA in South Los Angeles), ACE determined that we needed to build power of sufficient scope and scale to achieve systemic change. This discussion has helped us draft a five-year strategic plan that defines our role in the movement. ACE sees itself as part of a movement that is

building power from the bottom up, with strong grassroots organizations connected through networks and a broad base of leadership that is representative of, and accountable to, our communities.

ACE'S staff has community organizers born and raised in the neighborhood along with lawyers and other professionals from inside and outside the community, white and of color. Yet, none of us has license to speak for the community. As staff, we are accountable to the youth, residents, and community groups we work with. Our constituents currently make decisions about strategy and overall direction as members of our project and campaign committees and our board of directors. As we move to a membership structure, all decisions will flow from our members, who will also elect a majority of our board. Our job in supporting the grassroots is to continually develop leaders who in turn nurture others

to follow them. EJ organizations from across the country have agreed that the EJ agenda must be set by those most directly affected and that our first priority is to strengthen the grassroots base. At Summit 11, we went a step further with the “Principles of Working Together,” which sets a code of conduct to ensure the integrity of grassroots leadership while working with all sectors of the movement. The challenge now is to put our shared principles into practice by strengthening grassroots organizations. Change happens through collective action, not through an individual savior or charismatic leader. We must make ourselves replaceable and restrain personal glorification.

We must actively combat internalized racism and classism and put into practice meaningful democratic participation. As Gandhi said, we must be the change we wish to see in the world. ■

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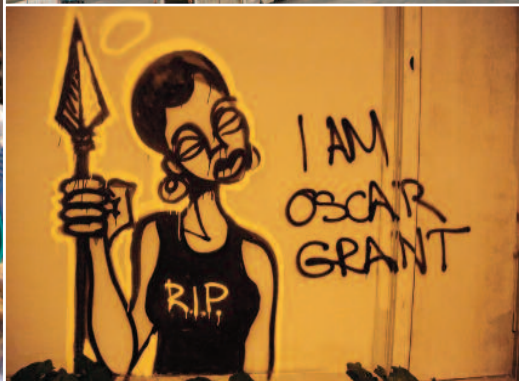
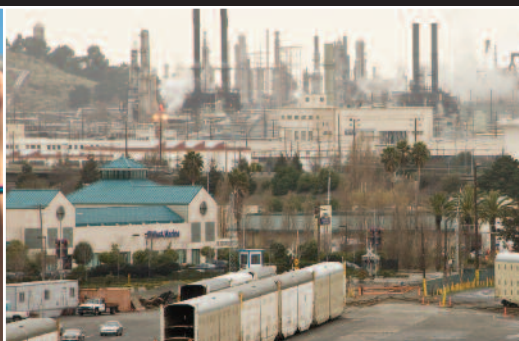
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