

Clean and Safe Ports: Building a Movement, Region by Region

By Martha Matsuoka

On March 20, 2008, hundreds of people filled the hall at Bannings Landing in the Los Angeles port community of Wilmington to witness the Los Angeles Harbor Commission adopt a Clean Trucks Program to reduce air pollution at the Port of Los Angeles. The program's goals were straight-forward: replace and retrofit approximately 16,000 trucks in order to meet the 2007 federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) emissions standards by 2012.

Once implemented, the Clean Trucks Program—which faces stiff opposition and pending lawsuits from industry—would require trucking companies which service the Port to hire truck drivers as employees rather than relying on independent truckers. With this model of doing business, the city hopes to reduce truck emissions, create a stable workforce, and set up mechanisms for community and government accountability.

It was a momentous event for members of the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports whose two-year campaign was finally bearing fruit. While there had been earlier (unsuccessful) organizing campaigns to unionize the truckers, this Coalition took a broader approach: it harnessed more than 30 diverse groups to join the truckers and incorporated economic and public health benefits into the campaign to create a precedent-setting model of trucking at the Port of Los Angeles.

A Victory of Many Flavors

The victory also brought significant advances for each of the Coalition partners—many of whom had specific agendas. For labor, made up of several unions and immigrant labor groups and led by the Teamsters, the national Change to Win Coalition offered a significant victory over the exploitative trucking system that came into being with the deregulation of the industry in the 1980s. Under that system, independent truck drivers had to bear the burden of all maintenance and upkeep of the trucks—which cost over \$100,000—along with Port fees, licensure, fuel

and other costs of doing business at the Port. Truckers who currently own and operate their trucks and must compete individually for hauling jobs net less than \$30,000 annually.¹ With the Clean Trucks Program and its employee concession model, labor has successfully put in place a system that shifts the cost of doing business at the Port from individual truckers to the firms that now employ them. Plus, truckers as employees now have the right to organize.

The Program was also an important victory for environmentalists and public health advocates. The South Coast Air Quality Management District has found that the combined ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach generate more than 20 percent of the diesel particulate that's the largest pollutant in Southern California. For long-time advocates of clean air and public health, the campaign goal to reduce diesel exhaust—responsible for 70 percent of all airborne cancer risk—was a high priority. Cleaning up to 2007 federal standards by replacing and retrofitting old trucks represents a significant advance in air quality policy. For Coalition partners, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Coalition for Clean Air, and the American Lung Association, the plan met important air quality and public health needs of Port communities.

In some ways, the campaign's focus on labor on the one hand and clean air/quality-of-life issues on the other reflects an historic and place-based framework for environmental justice. Environmental Justice (EJ) organizations saw the issues facing truck drivers—

Ports and Goods Movement: An Infrastructure for Social Movement Regionalism

In August 2008, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice won its lawsuit against the City of Bell for violating the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) when it leased land to BNSF Railway for an intermodal operation without an environmental review. The ruling represents a significant win for communities that have organized for years around the local impacts of rail traffic and provides an important legal tool for other communities seeking to enforce compliance with existing CEQA law. This is the stuff that good EJ and labor organizing is made of—mobilizing and empowering local members to build

an organization that is able to use legal and planning tools to lift up and magnify local voices into a social justice movement and a campaign win that is larger than itself.

The campaign and policy success of the Clean Trucks Program reflects an emerging movement, a social justice regionalism that builds on earlier movements but pays explicit attention to the region as an important analytical frame and scale for strategies and policy solutions. By redefining the terms of the debate, by engaging in coalitions, and building power (in the face of tremendous odds), Port and goods movement campaigns fuel



social movement regionalism and advance the potential for new regional economic development, just community development, and the advancement of progressive national politics. ■

many of whom are Latino immigrants from South Los Angeles, Wilmington, and Commerce—as deeply intertwined with the quality-of-life conditions in their neighborhoods, which are plagued by toxins in the air, water, and soil because of their proximity to industrial land.

Throughout the campaign, EJ coalition partners advocated for—and at times struggled with other coalition partners over—the need to protect their communities from the trucks and the further encroachment of Port industrial facilities into neighborhoods. The EJ definition of environment as “where we live, work, play, pray and go to school,” served as a framework to synthesize labor, environment, public health, and community issues for the campaign. The formation of the coalition and the campaign came as a natural extension of the organizing of community residents, many of whom were truckers. EJ organizers were able to engage with truckers on issues of home, family, and children and to rely on social networks rather than on labor unions and worker solidarity alone. It was a welcome new approach to many truckers soured by the unsuccessful organizing efforts of the past 27 years.

Defining Social Movement Regionalism

The Clean Trucks Program and the campaign leading up to it represent key elements in what has become known as “social movement regionalism”—an emerging form of regionalism that focuses on

redefining regional development, developing regional scale coalitions, and reworking power to transform the way the economy works.² It’s a movement led by coalitions of diverse groups functioning at the regional, state, and national levels.

For EJ groups, shifting scales from neighborhoods to regions made practical political sense: The air quality and health issues facing Wilmington, a community adjacent to the Port of Los Angeles, were shared by communities all along the goods movement corridors of the 710 Freeway, the Alameda Corridor Rail Project, and the rail lines that converge in the City of Commerce before heading East along three rail routes towards Riverside and San Bernardino.

The Ditching Dirty Diesel Collaborative in Oakland takes a similar approach of developing a regionwide strategy to reduce diesel emissions in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the Central Valley of California, groups work through existing organizations and coalitions, such as the Fresno Metro Ministries, to address the impact of increased air pollution along the rail and highway corridors of Fresno and Modesto. In San Diego, the Environmental Health Coalition has begun to focus on the impact of expanded port operations and the proposed new port complexes in Baja California, Mexico. These coalitions and collaboratives are now showing signs of scaling beyond neighborhoods to regions, and on to state and national levels in order to build power, policy, and influence in the ports, trade, and goods movement debates.

Photo:
On March 17, 2008
Coalition for Clean &
Safe Ports demonstrate
for cleaner air.

©2008 Marc Caswell/
Urban Habitat



Scaling Regional Equity to National Equity

In December 2007, The Impact Project organized a primarily community-based conference that drew more than 550 participants from 16 states and four countries interested in learning more about taking action to reduce the impacts of goods movement in their respective communities. At the request of conference participants, The Impact Project³ has undertaken the important task of building a national network to facilitate the sharing of information and strategies

Earlier this year, PolicyLink, a national policy advocacy and research institute based in Oakland, California, sponsored its third Regional Equity Summit in New Orleans, Louisiana. More than 2,000 people came together to discuss regional approaches to addressing persistent inequities within America's cities and regions. A panel entitled, "America's Gateways: Building a Progressive Ports Agenda," which looked at the impact of trade on regional economies, community health, and the environment was the first such discussion at a national summit and featured perspectives from Oakland, Los Angeles/Long Beach, and South Carolina. The audience, most with deep roots in environmental justice organizing, expressed growing concern about ports and goods movement in Cancer Alley, Mississippi as well as in New York and New Jersey.

In July 2008, the national Change to Win Coalition hosted a summit focused on identifying strate-

gies and opportunities for advancing clean trucks programs across the nation. Following the lead of the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports in Los Angeles, leaders from labor, environmental, EJ, and community organizations from Seattle/Tacoma, New York/New Jersey, and Oakland committed to sharing resources and lessons learned.

The number and diversity of the attendees and the scale of their participation in the three events suggest that discussions, debates, and community/region-based movements are reaching a national scale. The scaling up of strategies and goals that reflect regional power illustrate the core tenets of social movement regionalism: a redefinition of what Port operations and growth should look like and a recognition that coalition approaches are critical to bringing together divergent interests, and harnessing the power of labor, environmental, public health, EJ, faith, and community groups in the common pursuit of good jobs and clean air. ■

Endnotes

1. Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports. www.laane.org. See also "Sweatshops on Wheels: Union-Community Coalition Takes Aim at Port Trucking" by Doug Bloch. *Race Poverty & the Environment*, Vol 14-1 Spring 2007
2. For a full discussion of regionalism and its variants see: Pastor, Manuel, Benner, Chris, and Matsuoka, Martha. *This Could Be The Start of Something Big: How Social Movements for Regional Equity are Reshaping Metropolitan America*, Cornell University Press, forthcoming.
3. See www.TheImpactProject.org

Photo:

On March 17, 2008 almost 1,000 community members and organizations came together to support the Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports.

©2008 Marc Caswell/
Urban Habitat

Martha Matsuoka is an assistant professor in the Urban and Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College in southern California. In the 1990s she was the director of Urban Habitat's Economic Conversion Project.