

Voices of the Bioneers: Building alliances: labor, immigration and the environment

The Bioneers seek to unite nature, culture and spirit in an Earth-honoring vision and create economic models founded in social justice.

An annual Bioneers conference is held each October in Marin County. The following article is transcribed from one of the presentations at the 2006 conference.

Tune in to KVMR 89.5 FM on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month from 1-2 p.m. for “Voices of the Bioneers,” a program underwritten by Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op.

Special to the Co-op Reporter

By Maria Elena Durazo

Let me read some words about pesticides and the environment from a speech delivered more than two and a half decades ago. “The problem is this mammoth agribusiness system. The problem is the huge farms. The problem is the pressure on the lands from developers. The problem is not allowing the land to lay fallow and rest. The problem is the abandonment of cultural practices that stood the test of centuries, crop rotation, diversification of crops. The problem is monoculture, growing acres and acres of the same crops, disrupting the natural order of things, letting insects feast on acres and acres of a harem of delight, and using pesticides to kill off their natural predators. We see these same insane practices in the buyouts and the takeovers on Wall Street, exchanging long term security for short term gain. You sacrifice the company for the immediate rewards but you destroy what produces jobs and livelihood. Oscar Wilde once said, ‘a cynic is someone who knows the price of everything and value of nothing.’ People forget that the soil is our sustenance. It is a sacred trust. It is what has worked for us for centuries. It is what we pass on to future generations.”

The man who said these words was not an environmental leader; he was one of other great labor leaders and one of the great Americans of the 20th century. He inspired me to get involved in the labor movement, but yes, he was also a great environmentalist. His name was César Chávez. Many people don't realize that the first time DDT was banned in the United States was not by the EPA in 1972, but in a United Farm Workers contract with a grape grower in 1967. César Chávez's last and longest public fast of 36 days in 1988 was to protest the pesticide poisoning of farm workers and their children. While he was alive, Cesar was harshly criticized by the powerful agricultural lobby and those Republican governors then, for focusing his unions' efforts and sacrificing his health over the perils of pesticides. Asked why, César responded, because there is something even more important to farm workers than the benefits unionization brings, because there is something more important to the farm workers union than winning better wages and working conditions: That is protecting farm workers and consumers from systematic poisoning through the reckless use of agricultural toxics. There is nothing we care more about than the lives and safety of our families. There is nothing we share more deeply in common with the consumers of North America than the safety of the food all of us rely on.

César Chávez taught me, and so many others, about building alliances between trade unionists, immigrants and environmentalists long before such things became widely understood or accepted.

[In Los Angeles] labor has generated support by forming alliances with the wide array of community, religious, minority and student activists. Alliances of leadership on issues beyond labor's traditional, but important,

workplace concerns. A diverse collection of unions has joined the Apollo Alliance, an exciting project working at the intersection of environmentalism and economic development. Nationally, the Apollo Alliance unites nearly 16 million union members and 11 million environmental organization members to promote job creation in environmental technology. In southern California, union members as diverse as municipal workers, engineers and laborers have come together to lay the foundation for an equitable and sustainable economy. One of our unions, Local 18 of the electrical workers, has pushed the city of Los Angeles toward a greener future.

When asked more than two decades ago about the future of political participation by Latinos in the state and country, César Chávez replied that the influence Latinos didn't then enjoy at the ballot box would soon be made up in years to come. The Hispanic population, not to mention immigrants from many other parts of the world, is growing faster in the south, in fact, than anywhere else in the United States, from North Carolina to Arkansas, to Alabama and Tennessee. Some of you hopefully marched with millions just a few months ago. They marched in cities like Los Angeles and New York, as well as Dallas and Atlanta for one simple thing: Respect.

And as the president of Unite Here! International Union wrote recently, "America was built by successive waves of immigrants, whether they came here voluntarily or involuntarily. The genius of this country has been its repeated ability to rejuvenate and re-energize itself with new immigrants, to fight against nativism and racism, to enable all of them to become Americans and to stand, eventually, alongside earlier arrivals, all woven together into the great tapestry of America."

Brothers and sisters, these are human rights issues... let us continue striving to seek common ground and forge alliances at every opportunity between labor, environmental and immigrant communities. Not just because it is the smart thing to do but because it is the right thing to do.

Maria Elena Durazo, one of the nation's most prominent Hispanic labor leaders, is the President of the Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees Union (H.E.R.E.-Local 11, AFL-CIO) and General Vice-President of H.E.R.E.'s International Union (U.S. membership of over 250,000). One of 10 children of Mexican immigrant field workers, Maria earned a law degree in 1985 and became the first Latina to head a major union in Southern California. A member of the California Coastal Commission, she was also National Director of the Immigrant Workers' Freedom Ride, a national mobilization campaign to fix U.S. immigration laws.