

Community Coalition for Environmental Justice Paints Polluter into a Corner

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CCEJ

- a multi-racial, community-based coalition advocating for policies that create environmental justice
- develops new leadership so that those who are affected by environmental injustice are at the forefront of the struggle
- part of a global struggle to eliminate disproportionate environmental health hazards (*environmental racism*) in indigenous communities and communities of color
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A sunny day in Seattle finds many residents doing chores in the yard, perhaps mowing their lawns. But in the low income and largely Latino neighborhood of South Park, you might notice one disturbing difference: surgical masks.

Until recently, surgical masks were the only defense against decades of air pollution that inflicted a wide-

range of health problems on community residents. The source: Long Painting Company, the Northwest's largest painting contractor.

Specializing in large structures like dams, Boeing airplanes, and Seattle's Safeco Field, Long Painting has been established in the South Park residential area since 1975. Outdoor painting, sandblasting, and zinc metalizing operations are directly adjacent to community homes. Some sandblasting and spray booths are less than five feet from neighboring houses.

In the fall of 1997, the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ) began going door to door in South Park with an environmental health survey. "This was a case of environmental racism," says Lead Organizer Matt Remle. "This toxic polluter seemed to think they could get away with anything because they were bringing money into the city and they didn't expect too much concern about a low-income community of color."

Symptoms and illnesses reported by residents include: dizziness, nausea, headaches, coughing, wheezing, frequent nose bleeds, feeling sick, difficulty breathing, a metallic taste in the mouth, sinus problems, tearing and red eyes, asthma, and other respiratory problems in adults and children. CCEJ took these complaints to the Washington State Department of Health to demand an assessment of the health risks created by Long Painting.

Over the years, rapid expansion of company operations in this residential area had created an

increasingly severe range of environmental and public health problems. The Seattle Fire Department admitted that Long Painting had been without a permit to store hazardous chemicals since 1992. Yet upwards of 3,000 gallons of dangerous chemicals above allowable limits sat right next door to South Park houses.



credit: Annie Marie Musselman

With residents, CCEJ collected air samples, gathered signatures on petitions and letters calling for agency action, coordinated monthly strategy meetings, mobilized hundreds of residents to speak out at public hearings, and held community organizing trainings.

These efforts increased coverage of pollution problems at Long Painting

and forced the Seattle City Council and its regulatory bureaus to turn up the heat. Over three years of dedicated organizing led to increasing government inspections, fines, and organized community resistance. The public exposure and financial pressures finally pushed the company to announce in the Summer of 2001 that they would relocate.

The victory is especially sweet because Long Painting plans to move to a fully industrial site in Kent, Washington. Remle says, "Often times it's difficult to see a victory in relocation efforts when we know that the end result is that another vulnerable community will have to pay the cost of housing a polluter. In this case, we're pleased that the planned relocation is not targeted for a residential area."

Although South Park residents and CCEJ were happy to hear Long Painting's relocation announced, no one believes their work is over. Not only will residents remain vigilant until Long Painting is actually gone and the site is cleaned up, they have now turned their sights toward getting the area rezoned. CCEJ continues to support neighborhood leaders and has shifted roles to helping South Park residents solidify their own community organization called Our Space.



Matt Remle, CCEJ's organizer, is a graduate of the Center's advanced organizer training program, WILD.