

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL *perspectives*

By Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

Onward to UNCED: The Demand for Environmental Justice

In June 1992, leaders from over one hundred and fifty nations will gather in Brazil for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). This unprecedented global gathering offers a clear sign to all of us that there is a growing realization on the part of governments that we must attend to protecting the ecological balance of the planet before it is too late. The final negotiations leading up to the UNCED will take place in New York this spring.

One of the goals of UNCED is to facilitate an international mobilization to redress the world's increasing environmental and economic crises. Heads of state and other high government officials from a majority of the nations of the world will be gathered together for this important conference. In addition, there will be thousands of representatives of non-governmental organizations, grassroots representatives, and environmental and social justice activists from throughout the world.

Yet, as the final preparatory activities are now being planned and implemented, it appears to many that the government of the United States in particular is not making UNCED a high priority. Once again, it appears that the politics of the White House views issues concerning the environment and the related issue of economic development as cannon fodder in the partisan war between the Republican and Democratic parties. Of course, the very reason for the convening of UNCED is to raise the importance of the environment above the internal political agendas

of the participating nations and governments.

The truth is the Bush Administration's record on environmental protection exhibits a greater interest in protecting the perceived needs and agendas of America's polluting industries than protecting the environment from further degradation. In addition, President Bush seems to believe in the immoral juxtaposition of a safe environment against economic recovery and development.

It is true that in a time of extreme economic recession, there is a tendency to triage other social interests. The problem is that the destruction of the vital ecological equilibrium of our planet has nearly reached an irreversible crisis stage. Any further triage of the global environment will prevent not only long term economic development by the nations of the world but more importantly the very existence of humanity itself now threatened. For example, the recent climate negotiations exposed the contradiction of the United States attempting to stonewall any real progress by being the only dissenting vote, 139-1, on a binding international convention to protect the ozone layer from further destruction.

The good news is there is in fact a new movement emerging across the United States in urban and rural communities. The name of this new movement is the Environmental Justice Movement, which is amultiracial, multicultural, multilingual grassroots environmental movement with the capacity to translate a new national political

will in the United States on the issue of the environment. This new movement, as thousands of new coalitions are being networked, has international implications. Representatives of the Environmental Justice Movement are participating in the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) to UNCED and are rendering an alternative voice to the inadequate responses of the Bush Administration concerning the critical importance of the success of UNCED.

Like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, the Environmental Justice Movement of the 1990's is organizing and mobilizing constituencies across the lines of race, class and religion into a potent social and moral force for change in the United States. We note that last fall The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. attracted Native American, African American, Latino American and Asian Pacific American leaders together with leaders of some of the established national environmental organizations to envision a broader and stronger environmental movement.

UNCED will not be the end or the beginning of the global environmental movement, but it will be an important step in the right direction toward demanding stronger accountability and compliance with international covenants to protect the environment and to promote sustainable development. Our role is to demand that our government be on the right side of history, i.e., on the side of protecting the environment and demanding economic justice and environmental justice for all.

You know what's really great readers? That is to get phone calls and letters from you that say, "Hey, such and such was right on! ..keep up the good work." But, let me tell you something, there is merit, too, in that old saying about "imitation being the sincerest form of flattery."

As I've noticed before--or as readers have appraised me--the daily press has, again, latched onto an important issue of immediacy that I have introduced. They have chosen to follow suit with their own advocacy of the Community College as a way to go career-wise in these days of educational uncertainty. When I first presented this idea a year ago (first time since the 1970's) I was greeted with some quite amazing--and even caustic comments. "How could you, a university professor, dare to make a case for an alternative route when everyone is beating the drums for a universal effort to get all minority youth a four year college degree." Well, all that glitters is not gold!

Let me put it this way. I said, "well, well now" when last week the Portland *Oregonian* described an Oregon State University honors graduate who had abandoned a two-year stint at six-dollar-an-hour jobs for a two-year radiologic technology course at community college--the lady will graduate this year into a career that begins at \$22,000 to \$25,000 a year. Of course, all entry-level salaries are not that high but the point is made. Would you accept \$18,000?

It was on February 26, this year, that I made the following statement here in the *Portland Observer*: "Education and industry have finally admitted to themselves that we are not going to be financially or structurally able to get all those millions of students into universities in time to produce a work force 2000 that can compete with the world in science and technology." I went on to say that "we are scrambling all over the place trying to upgrade the skills of our high school graduates or pushing our community colleges to prepare to handle a great surge in demand for two-year technical degrees and in retraining courses."

Now, that article in the *other newspaper* went on to describe a new video series called "Career Blazers," produced by the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries. Several Trailblazer players participated in the making of the eight-part series that describes the "post-high school education required of chefs, machinists, electricians, heavy equipment operators, indoor and outside construction workers and a variety of health-care jobs."

The latter category fits in very well with my recent three-week series on African Americans who have made notable contributions in the field of medicine. There was cited, of course, those with a *full spectrum of degrees*, but I would draw your attention again to "Vivien T. Thomas, the Louisiana high school graduate who became the *Top Surgical Technician in America* (February 26, 1992)."

As in most cases, I speak from an experience-based perspective, from reality, not speculation. During the years of teaching and advising students at Portland State University, I was able to guide a number from an insurmountable economic barrier to graduation from the four-year institution--into a quite feasible and productive associate degree in Technology at Portland Community College. They did not take the route of hundreds of students each year who drop out of the university, broke and disgusted and with an unfocused and unmarketable collection of hours toward an undefined degree.

Of course, I came to this teaching position from industry where I had gained many years of experience in technical crafts and trades before gaining academic and administrative skills--from punch press operator to electrical instrument technician. It is for this reason that I am able to understand and advance the realistic propositions that are now being placed before us in an effort to get our national priorities on track.

Decades of deterioration and neglect of our educational institutions and processes cannot be reversed overnight. The "Year 2000" people are going to have to wait a bit longer to achieve "international parity." First, we have a score of remedial things to do--from kindergarten to K12. And then, too, there is the "economy" which must be altered to afford it all.

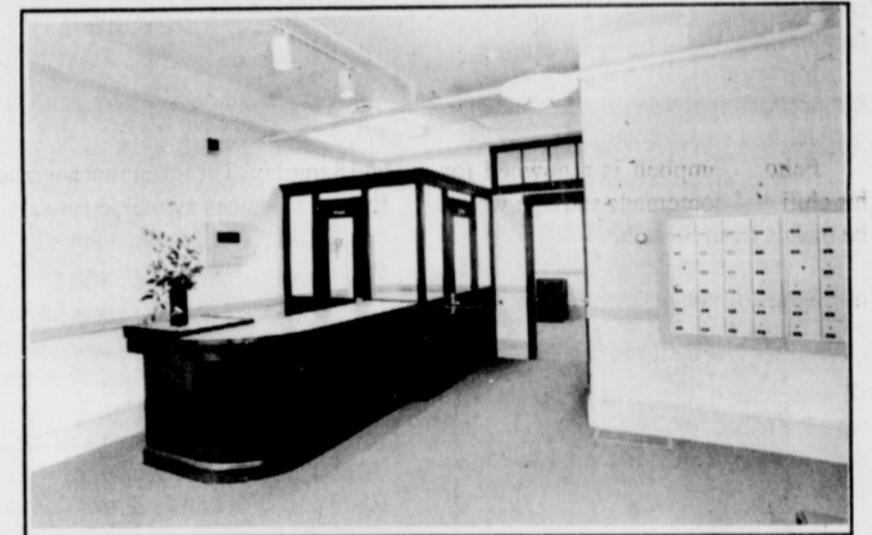
Shoreline Is The First SRO Project In City With Direct Link To Training And Jobs: Aim Is To Help Homeless Become Self Sufficient

The newly-renovated Shoreline Building, the 63-unit SRO (single-room occupancy) project just completed by the Downtown Housing Preservation Partnership (DHPP), will be the first in the City to establish a direct link between transitional housing and programs with a strong focus on training and employment.

The Shoreline, at 113 W. Burnside, will draw most of its tenants from a pool of homeless "job-ready" adults graduating from North Downtown shelters and alcohol recovery programs. Case management and employment services will be provided at the Shoreline to assist tenants in breaking the cycle of homelessness and achieving self sufficiency. Tenants will progress from day labor to permanent jobs and will remain at the Shoreline until they have accumulated savings to pay first month's rent and necessary deposits on permanent housing. The average tenant will stay at the Shoreline approximately nine months.

The Shoreline is the second SRO project to be completed by DHPP in 1992. The Sally McCracken Building with 95 new SRO units for homeless graduates of drug and alcohol recovery programs opened in January.

"Through DHPP which has won national recognition for its innovative approach to spurring the development of low-income housing, Portland has begun making real headway in its efforts to address the tragedy of homelessness," said PDC Chairman Douglas McGregor. "Just since the start of the new year, we've opened 158 new SRO units to our neediest citizens--and many more are planned." PDC is the City's urban renewal, housing and economic development agency.



The Shoreline Building lobby after renovation. The renovated Shoreline Building (113 W. Burnside) has 63 SRO units for homeless "Job Ready" Adults. The renovation is a project of the Downtown Housing Preservation Partnership whose partners include Central City Concern, Portland Development Commission, Portland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, and the Housing Authority of Portland.



The Shoreline Building Lobby prior to renovation.

Labor Commissioner Roberts Endorses School First Program

Today Labor Commissioner Mary Wendy Roberts had a news conference at the Old Spaghetti Factory to announce "School First," a program that implements several of the recommendations set forth by the Child Labor Task Force. School First is a voluntary work authorization program that, for the first time, formally involves parents and schools, as well as employers, in the process of regulating minors' work hours.

The Child Labor Task Force, appointed by Roberts, issued its report in November 1991 recommending that the commissioner consider a work authorization program for teen workers and that employers adopt voluntary employment guidelines aimed at improving youth work. At a news conference

announcing the report, commissioner Roberts issued a challenge to employer groups and associations to work with her to implement these recommendations.

Within a week, commissioner Roberts and employer associations sat down to discuss implementation. School First is the product of these discussions.

School First employers receive a packet that includes a set of voluntary guidelines, recommendations to make the work experience more educational for young people, a copy of child labor laws and prohibited occupations, and work authorization forms. The form lists the employee's duties, hours of work and pay, and includes a sign-off authorization from parents and the

school. This way, if for example a student's grades begin to fall, either a parent or a school official can propose modifications to the work schedule. It is important to note, however, that this voluntary system does not replace the current work permit-employment certificate system required by law.

"Today's labor force is our adult work force of the future - a work force we all share the responsibility to nurture," said Roberts. "School First is an important step in getting parents, employers and school officials actively involved in the work lives of our children."



Congressional Checks "Made In America"

BY MCKINLEY BURT

America's congressional representatives have just provided the answer to "who is running the store?" They are--for themselves! And while they may not also have an inhouse bank with unlimited overdraw privileges, you can bet that U.S. senators maintain their own bag of goodies.

The *New York Times* News Service suggests that this business of our congressmen bouncing checks by the thousands is "at one level, not serious at all," but does observe that "being able to write ad checks without ever getting charged for it, and indeed, often without the checks bouncing, is something we taxpayers cannot do." Tens of millions of us have made the same observation and intend for a lot of heads to roll this fall.

Many of our more naive citizenry are becoming aware, for the first time, that they have elected a great number of incompetent, unresponsive and plain dishonest charlatans to guard the national treasure. No thirty-second sound bites on radio and television can repair this damage--the pitiful excuses we have heard enable us to understand the reason for the pitiable state of the economy and the resulting social condition of the masses. If we are to believe that these people cannot balance a personal check-

book [if], then certainly they should not be expected to handle the nation's finances.

That "Made in America" theme is riding high at the top of the economic hit parade, but will those who are newly awakened and disillusioned by "rubergate" recall that it is from the retired ranks of these very same congressmen that we got to many of those registered foreign agents who negotiated all those lucrative American contracts for the Japanese and other overseas firms? The rest of these patriot hustlers have come mostly from the ranks of former cabinet members, administration officials and members of prominent law firms having government business.

Now, if that is difficult to understand, then try this on for size. The very same automakers who accompanied President Bush on that obscene comedy of an expedition to Japan are now trying to explain to the American media and public why they withheld the statistics on the foreign content of "American" cars and replacement parts-- including Mexican assembly costs (note that the administration is pushing for a "fast track" escalation of this scenario that will replace even more American jobs).

Certainly, it is not promised that if

we replace most of our congressional nerds come November, a new breed of representatives will inhabit the legislative halls and the public good and interest will be pursued as never before. But, at least, we can send a message that there is going to be an era of accountability and responsibility. At least for awhile. We all know that the public soon forgets.

I think we can be a little selective, however, in this "replacement process." We know very well what our most compelling and critical needs are. Let's trot out and vote for success models, even if we have to drag them kicking, screaming and protesting to the campaign circuit. (This, of course, should be at every level of public service, not just congress). We need some experience-based actors on this stage--from both the public and private sectors there must be brought forward those in the spheres of education, science and industry who can function beyond self-serving rhetoric and a tendency toward turpitude.

These are serious times, and this is serious business. We need to enroll our youth in our crusades, so that early on they can learn what it is all about--the body politic, the infrastructure, and, generally, the "ways of mice and men" (and women, of course).

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