



The Coming Revolt

Charting a course to stop the use of poisons

By Jay Feldman and Terry Shistar

There are signs of change emerging everyday throughout the country and around the world. However, it is often hard to imagine a future without toxic chemicals--given current cultural practices, chemical-biased policies, chemical-dependent practices, barriers to legal recourse for victims, rampant involuntary exposure, the lack of widespread adoption of alternatives, and alliances between powerful chemical corporations and pesticide users, farmers, utilities, and exterminators.

Things are getting worse, it could be argued. The people are subdued into thinking that the status-quo is in their interest, that they are safe in the marketplace and in their communities.

The chemical industry world view

The chemical industry holds a view of the world that looks like this. People don't think much about the horror of toxic poisoning and contamination. They believe the problem is the mosquito, not the chemicals sprayed to kill them with limited effect. They believe that cheap food and its contaminated production system serves them and meets their need to balance the family checkbook. They believe that if contamination oc-

curs, their water can be purified or turn to bottles if necessary. They do not worry about other living things depending on the water, air, or soil that they poison. They believe that government protects them from the bad actor untrustworthy chemical company. They distrust big corporations that put profit before their health and welfare, but buy their products. They toil in their yard, garden and lawn with toxic chemicals and are not concerned about soil health and toxic effects. They do not worry about chemical run-off into their town's waterways or drinking supply. They do not worry about the farmworkers who harvest the food. They do not worry about sending their children to schools sprayed with pesticides in the buildings and on the playing fields. They do not worry about their pet's exposure. They play on toxic golf courses without concern. They believe that chemical corporations have rights and our economic system should protect them.

Principles at stake

With content people, the Establishment is moving to solidify its power should the people awaken.

The pesticide industry is seeking to:

- **Thwart democracy.** The industry seeks to eliminate the democratic process by which local government may historically protect the health and welfare of their residents, in this case, through the adoption of ordinances restricting pesticides.
- **Define the terms of our language to ensure dependency on their products.** The industry defines “pests” and the conditions that need to be controlled, squelching efforts to fulfill human needs without poisons, educate on ecological balance and prevent the conditions that contribute to imbalance.
- **Manipulate the underlying law and its implementation to serve corporate needs.** The industry has successfully manipulated the legislative and regulatory process to pass laws that contain unclear safety standards, assume the need for and usefulness of toxic pesticides by prohibiting an evaluation of their essentiality, utilize risk assessment methodology that mischaracterizes real world exposures and sensitivities, allow untested products to remain on the market indefinitely, and permit secrecy for toxic product ingredients.
- **Block access to the courts.** The industry seeks to deny those seeking compensation for damages associated with pesticide use access to the courts. The U.S. Supreme Court has heard argument in *Bates v. DowAgroSciences*, in which the Dow Chemical Company argues that farmers damaged by poisons used in compliance with label instructions do not have a right to sue the company because it has registered its pesticides with EPA.
- **Create false alliances between the chemical industry, government agencies and environmental organizations.** *The Lawn and Environment Guidelines* (2005), issued by industry and government agencies, sought to entice environmental organizations to join a campaign for the “safe use of pesticides,” urging people to follow the pesticide label.
- **Greenwashing.** The chemical lawn care industry launched Project Evergreen to mislead the public on the benefits of a chemical-intensive green lawn.

Pressure for change

Meanwhile, poisoning and contamination abound. As some pressure for change builds, policy reforms are adopted to mollify those who oppose the chemical industry. These reforms over decades do not work. Victims remain out of sight. Despite extremely high rates of cancer, infertility, asthma, neurological disorders, immune system dysfunction, and learning disabilities, the voices of the victims are not heard. The industry moves ahead.

A look at history suggests that the environmental revolt is coming. Howard Zinn, in his chapter “The Coming Revolt of the Guards” in *A People’s History of the United States*, writes

that the Establishment and the political process has not consistently throughout history been able to contain the anger of the people. Among other periods, he cites the “surge of the sixties, from people thought long subdued or put out of sight—blacks, women, Native Americans, prisoners, soldiers—and a new radicalism, which threatened to spread widely in a population disillusioned by the Vietnam War and the politics of Watergate.” Dr. Zinn continues, “[T]he Establishment has been unable to keep itself secure from revolt. Every time it looked as if it had succeeded, the very people it thought seduced or subdued, stirred and rose. Blacks, cajoled by Supreme Court decisions and congressional statutes, rebelled. Women, wooed and ignored, romanticized and mistreated, rebelled. Indians, thought dead, reappeared, defiant. Young people, despite lures of career and comfort, defected. Working people, thought soothed by reforms regulated by law, kept within bounds by their own unions, went on strike. Government intellectuals, pledged to secrecy, began giving away secrets. Priests turned from piety to protest.”



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The Coming revolt

In the pesticide arena, there are signs that people know that they are not adequately protected and, in fact, are abused by the Establishment. The following list exemplifies the coming revolt, as the entrenched industry and an out-of-touch government effectively alienates the people.

- **Local action to stop spraying for West Nile virus.** Citizens acting to protect themselves. From Washington, DC to Lyndhurst, Ohio to Seattle, Washington, say no to poison spraying for West Nile virus after assembling the facts on source reduction and lack of efficacy associated with spray programs.
- **Local action to stop the aesthetic/cosmetic use of poisons.** Communities no longer want to accept local spraying of toxic chemicals for aesthetic lawn care uses because they cause widespread involuntary exposure. At

least five states have introduced legislation to overturn undemocratic laws that have taken away local authority.

- **Victims sue to force action.** Pending decisions in lawsuits on the failure of EPA to act on hazardous wood preservatives (*Beyond Pesticides v. Leavitt, EPA*), and deny those harmed by pesticides access to the courts to seek damages (*Bates v. Dow AgroSciences*) may clarify an unresponsive and biased system of chemical dependency.
- **School districts seek to stop the use of poisons in schools.** Local school districts have issued restrictions that recognize that the regulatory system is not adequately protective of children's health and the environment.
- **Court decision recognizes the unacceptability of chemical trespass and its impact on the ecosystem.** The Minnesota Supreme Court issued a ruling that protects bee pollinators, recognizing the essential

to choose clean water, uncontaminated air, and health-giving food) and "How do we get it?" This leads to questions about appropriate land use and plant species in different climatic and geologic conditions.

The coming revolt will question the assumptions that we have made in the past so that we may redesign our approach to a problem that has remained intractable despite more than 40 years of effort since the publication of *Silent Spring*. In order to do this, our questions must challenge the premises embodied in our current paradigm or world view. This process uncovers a deep concern for our health, our children's health, the health of the environment, and a deep desire for change. As the chemical industry and government pushes back against the calls for change, further alienating, misleading, and oppressing people and their right to a healthy environment, people will assert themselves in communities all across the country.

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need to protect areas in which bees forage.

- **Nonchemical approaches to agriculture, horticulture, public health protection, etc.** The success of alternative approaches, such as organic management techniques, show that the hazards and unknowns associated with chemical-intensive approaches is unnecessary.
- **Government staff blow the whistle on off-the-record politicized agency activity.** Staff disclosed a secretive EPA agreement with Dow Chemical to extend the phase-out of the highly neurotoxic insecticide chlorpyrifos (Dursban), which was covered in the *Washington Post*, focusing EPA to reverse course.

The focal point for change is local

As the focus of pesticide restrictions shifts to local action, EPA and other government agencies are increasingly marginalized and resented when they seek to intervene by imposing or allowing unwanted, dangerous and unnecessary dispersal of poisons. As local decision makers confront toxic chemical issues, they increasingly replace questions of which poison should be sprayed to kill "pests" with the larger questions: "What do we want?" (Adequate supply of healthful food, healthy living conditions, safe schools and playgrounds, aesthetically pleasing environs, access to necessary information, and the ability

Conclusion

Dr. Zinn says, "To recall [history] is to remind people of what the Establishment would like them to forget—the enormous capacity of apparently helpless people to resist, of apparently contented people to demand change. To uncover such history is to find a powerful human impulse to assert one's humanity. It is to hold out, even in times of deep pessimism, the possibility of surprise."

