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**Interview with Larry Yates,
CHEJ Grassroots Organizing Mentor**

Interviewer (I): Larry, tell me your position with the organization and how long you've been with them and what you do.

Larry Yates (L): OK, I'm an organizer. The official title, I almost never use is "Grassroots Organizing Mentor." I started in November of 1998. Primarily what I do is to work with folks on the telephone in the office and sometimes by email, and occasionally go out to communities, but we don't have a lot of resources for that. People who are facing some kind of threat or abuse and who are asking for help, and my job is to help them understand that organizing is an option and that if they chose that option how to do it.

I: I got the impression that you've worked for a number of different activist type groups, is that right?

L: Yeah, primarily with housing and neighborhood issues before I came here.

I: I also got the impression that you felt like the organizing you do here is the same or basically the same?

L: Yeah, organizing is organizing. It's understanding power, mobilizing people, power, community power to have an impact on their issue. With any kind of organizing you have to learn the content of the issue. There's always technical aspects, legal aspects or scientific, or whatever it might be. And an organizer learns to do that. There are plenty of organizers that go back and forth every couple of years. Lois was talking today about a citizen action organizer she deals with. They do environmental stuff for a while. They'll do community reinvestment, then they'll do...anyway they'll switch from issue to issue quite frequently. It's not an unusual thing. An organizer looks at organizing as the key skill.

I: And you also said that the problems that CHEJ deals with or the place of technology isn't unique to this realm?

L: Well, certainly you've got to deal with engineering and technology. If you're looking at housing, if you're looking at highways, there are a lot of other issues. The phrase you used--the "built environment"--is a good phrase. I mean people have been fighting highways since organizing began. Housing is a major issue and a lot of people work on it. People get more caught up with the technical issues in the work we do as a general rule, than they do those issues but frankly we try to discourage

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that. We're interested in developing people who know how to use democracy at a grassroots level and take it beyond the grassroots level. We're not interested in producing a lot budding junior scientists. That's not our goal. People will learn a lot about science and hopefully have science demystified, but we're not trying to create environmental scientists.

I: I see that you stressed democracy in emails--that's the real goal. So can you tell me as an organizer how you go about that. I would guess that someone would call and say there's a corporation that wants to put in a landfill, how can you help me? What's the first thing that you would tell them to do?

L: Well, I start by talking about who we are. That's the source of our authority in any sense of the word. A couple senses of the word apply, but to some extent Lois' name and the experience of Love Canal is a source of authority. It gives some credibility to what I'm saying. But it also is a reference point to bring them to an understanding about thinking about organizing. So first I would say this is what we are, this is what we do, and this is how we can help you. I try not to dismiss other options. I mean we don't encourage folks to go to a lawyer. We don't say going to a lawyer is insane and useless. Whatever I might think, I'm not going to say that because people need to make their own choices. Once they accept to some extent the organizing model, and for most communities, for working class low-income communities this is the only model that is available to them. It's not too hard to show the problems with going to court, if you don't have deep pockets. And most of these groups have passed the point of trying to logically explain to the polluter why they shouldn't pollute. They've already tried that and it didn't work. So they're recognizing they have to apply some kind of force or power. And when I say to them this is the power they have available to them they get it. Then we start to talk about how to organize. The models that I talk about are democratic models. Models that increase participation, that involve people. The materials that we send out get a lot of people involved and you keep them engaged. And you exercise your power as a community. You have the right to participate because...part of it is emphasizing democracy at a functional grassroots level as a democratic organization. Just as big a part of it is emphasizing that this is supposed to be a democracy and that you have as much right or more right to be heard and to be effective as someone who just comes in with money as one person or five people with money. So we're emphasizing democracy in that way too.

I: How does CHEJ decide which projects it will work on--like the national campaigns for instance?

L: The national campaigns all came out of local fights. In a way we don't decide. I mean in a way there are obviously some decisions we make. But if somebody comes to us with the nucleus of a community group and there's an issue that they feel is serious--95% of the time if they feel its serious that's enough for us. We don't

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evaluate it. We work with everybody who shows up, or who meets those criteria. I mean if its an issue that falls totally out of our domain like community reinvestment or nuclear power, we just don't do them, because there are other groups that do, and there are generally a lot of very special aspects so we generally don't work on nuclear issues. But if an issue falls within our fairly broad bailiwick and it's a serious group and they want to work on it, we'll work with them. Over time, out of the groups that we have worked with, networks have developed, contacts have developed and we promote that, we encourage that. And discussions have happened and all three of the campaigns came out of discussions that people had at the grassroots level had with each other. Now I'm not saying we didn't encourage or provide opportunities for people to come together and talk. I'll give you an example of one that didn't work. Not long after I came here I realized I was talking to people in NYC about NYC waste and what was happening. And I was talking to people in Virginia and Pennsylvania about where NYC waste ends up, and I wondered if we could find a way for grassroots people to come together and find some common ground on what needs to happen with NYC waste. Rather than have them sort of at loggerheads with the NYC people trying to get it out of NYC, and the VA and PA people trying to push it back. For instance, NYC doesn't recycle anywhere as much as it could. And there are some companies promoting an unjust approach to where this stuff goes. Trying to find communities like Charles City County, VA. It's a very poor mostly people of color community. They've essentially bought the county. So we had a meeting in Baltimore. We got people together--grassroots activists from NYC, PA, VA, and NJ--and we sat them down together and said can we find some common approaches? Well, the answer was no! We tried and people had some good conversations and some of those people are still in touch with each other. But there wasn't a common ground for a campaign. For a lot of reasons, it just wasn't there and we didn't force it. We didn't say we're going to go ahead and have a campaign anyway. Obviously I had some feeling that there would be but the fact is there wasn't and so there isn't. In the dioxin campaign people came together and said we're fighting incinerators, we're fighting PVC, we're fighting a lot of different things all of which has this common thread--that dioxin is being emitted into the environment. If we go after dioxin it will give us a way to have some leverage on these different polluters that are operating in our communities. Now I wasn't there when that happened five or six years ago, but that was a strategy or decision that people made. Lois certainly was very much a part of that--nurturing it and bringing it along. But if people hadn't felt that it made sense--people at the local level said to me as they did about the NYC trash: "No, this just doesn't make sense to us"--the campaign would not have moved forward. We aren't paying anybody outside this office to do this campaign. A lot of people are very engaged in the dioxin campaign. They do things. They do different actions. They do it because it fits their local grassroots organizing.

I: How do you get people to engage something at the local level such as dioxin, that is so much more diffuse than say an incinerator?

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L: Grassroots people have called me up who don't even know what organizing is-- they aren't going to get into the dioxin campaign. But people who've been fighting incinerators, or PVC plants over a long period of time understand that they can use some handles beyond what they can develop at the local level. Particularly on a very long tough fight like the folks in Louisiana, where you've got a very powerful chemical industry, and a very corrupt political system. People are just not winning and there's a lot of fights and so they need some handles. For the EPA to crack down on dioxin would be a handle that they could use. But those are people who have grown sophisticated over time. You know, Joe Blow who calls me up for the first time, you know I'm not going to pull them into the dioxin campaign.

I: So it's another level then?

L: Right, right, the campaigns are for people who are already pretty engaged and who are pretty engaged for the long haul. So we're looking at regional groups, or they can be very grassroots. There's a group in Oakland, CA called "Pueblo" that's a grassroots organization, but it's a permanent organization. They work on several different issues. They've got a website. One of the issues is shutting down an incinerator and as part of that process, and other industrial issues they have pushed an ordinance against dioxin production in Oakland, which is kind of an esoteric thing. But they've got people out at meetings, and mobilized people behind it, because they're educated folks. They've worked on it so they are people who are coming from the grassroots, the blocks and their street corners to go to meetings, or Oakland city hall to say, "no dioxin should be produced in Oakland."

I: I saw in the paper where an international treaty banning the "dirty dozen" POPs had passed. Does CHEJ have a connection with this?

L: Yes, a number of us have been to the international conventions...

I: How do those connections work? Are they just informal?

L: There's an organization called IPEN (International POPs Elimination Network) which we're a part of and in which there's a US section of people who coordinate and work on this with the belief that there's some value for our dioxin organizing and our work on PCBs. Other national groups that are involved work on pesticides. We don't do as much, though we certainly do relate to pesticides. Again, we feel like this gives people a handle; gives people something to work with. The international process around POPs has put pressure on the US to be stronger, particularly around dioxin. Because one of the key issues or debates for getting this international treaty was the issue of calling for the elimination of the production of dioxin. Dioxin is not produced on purpose; it's a by-product, so if you have good procedures you're not

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going to produce dioxin at least not in any significant quantities like we see now. For instance, there's a lot of dioxin produced in paper production. You can produce paper without producing any dioxin, with a chlorine-free process. Incinerators produce dioxin. Incinerators are not necessary. There are other ways of dealing with waste. The vast amount of incinerators are extremely unnecessary. There's a very small amount that you have to find something similar that's destructive like incineration, but it doesn't have to be something that emits a chemical. When you work out the elimination of dioxin, which is part of the treaty, then you're pushing all of these issues at the local level. It's a tool. And the Europeans are going to be moving forward to eliminate dioxin. They're not going to do everything we'd like them to do, but they're doing a substantial amount. PVC is likely to disappear. There are supermarket chains in Europe that just don't allow PVC in their stores. No products can come into their supermarkets packaged in PVC period. And that's a big change...Sweden...there was a developing a country that imposed a PVC ban, but anyway all of that is going to push the US. So again it give us the tools to push the US policy. As we develop national tools that we can take to the local level.

I: So there are other organizations like the international POPs that work at the macro level?

L: It's a little more of a macro thing. Some members like World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace, those are very large organizations. They are not grassroots organizations in the normal sense. I mean Greenpeace is an activist organization and I have a lot of respect for them, but they're not grassroots based and WWF is not either really. Its not activist and its not grassroots based. So those are also a part of IPEN, but IPEN has also been very effective. The other piece of this is that you give grassroots people the opportunity to take action. Grassroots people from the US--La, Me, and AK-- have gone to the IPEN meetings and have spoken to international audiences to make their case. When somebody does that and they go back to La, they are a different person. They've learned something, they've grown in respect for themselves. They don't have the same fear of the chemical companies because they've seen they can go up against the chemical companies and win, or come out even. So it's also a means of development. Of course for the national campaigns its even more true. The dioxin campaign did an action on the Science Advisory Board that was looking at reassessment of dioxin. This is a group of scientists who sit up on a panel and pontificate. People come in their suits and ties and give testimonies then they pontificate some more and they say what they're going to say. Of course the scientists are industry hacks, but that's OK, some of them are more on our side or whatever...But the idea is that they have their own encapsulated science guys process. The dioxin campaign brought a whole bunch of people here who were in grassroots activism--a dairy farmer from Minnesota, an African-American couple that has organized against a military facility in their community, and also people that are professional environmentalists and activists. They did an action here what we call the

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"bellies." These were plaster-of-paris bellies that were designed at a conference a few years ago and now have been used in a lot of actions. It's basically a woman's torso and pregnant belly. These women lined up on either side of where the scientists come in with signs that had some comment essentially saying that some scientists were essentially bought--that they were essentially in the service of the chemical industry. The chair of the group actually had done work for the tobacco industry. The connection could be real clearly made. So they didn't say anything, they just stood there, but there was a very powerful critique. Then they came into the room and occupied the first two rows of the space so they were right in the face of these scientists. When the scientists spoke they had to give a statement about conflict of interests. But the conflict of interest as designed by the NAS is defined very narrowly--"do you own stock in a company"? "Are you employed directly by a company"? Well most of the scientists that are company hacks, are consultants, or they work for a non-profit that gets lots of money. The Center for Risk Analysis at Harvard for instance gets a lot of direct corporate money but that isn't considered a conflict of interest under the rules. So while they were presenting their conflict of interests--they were basically saying they didn't have one; technically under those rules they didn't--our folks in the audience held up signs stating the different corporations they had been paid by. This is all very powerful stuff. We got a good decision out of the process. It also had a very powerful effect on those...that dairy farmer who is going back to Minnesota is not going to be the same person she was when she came. She's going to take back that knowledge to her local activists. So we try to do the campaigns. I'm not saying that we always succeed, but our campaigns are meant to compliment and strengthen grassroots activism and to come out of it. And ultimately since we're not paying anyone to do that. We don't have any budget. I mean we can fly a few people to a meeting and put them up in a hotel for a few days, that's stretching it for us. But we don't send out organizers to run our campaign. These also aren't the kind of campaigns that mainstream enviros are involved in. You know send letters to your congressmen and write a check. If there aren't people out in the community doing these things, these campaigns don't exist.

I: There seems to be animosity between the grassroots and the more mainstream environmental organizations. Do you feel this way?

L: Well, its not animosity. It's a disagreement about how to organize and you have the same thing across the board. When I was in housing I worked with tenant groups where...the National Alliance of HUD Tenants that I helped start--grassroots, low-income, mostly people of color in HUD housing--were speaking for themselves and meeting with the secretary of HUD and having an impact on policy, and going after members of congress, and changing their minds. And there would be a big divide when they would interact with the standard inside the beltway housing lobbyists. It's a very different approach, much more rough and ready, much more about power, much more about making things happen and not so concerned about what sort of

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relationship you have with Senator so and so, or their aid. So yeah, there's a difference between an inside the beltway kind of approach, and an approach that doesn't mobilize grassroots people and an approach that does. It's a big divide.

I: A lot of mainstream environmental organizations seem to be paying more attention to environmental justice issues. Do you see connections being made between grassroots mobilizers and mainstream organizations, or do you think it's simply not possible?

L: Well anything is possible. It's kind of different for different groups and I'm kind of new to the environmental world. Sierra Club, for instance, is locally based. They have local chapters. I compare it to the NAACP, which is an organization I probably had more interaction with before, but the Sierra Club and the NAACP are chapter based. And both of them have great chapters and lousy chapters. And both of them have national hierarchies that are less sensitive than they could be to what's going on at the grassroots. But can you build a good local coalition including Sierra Club folks? Of course. In some places absolutely. Like you can with the NAACP, just like you can with some union locals. When you get to a group like NRDC it appears to be much more top down and doesn't have a lot of local membership. I mean they have members all over the country, but they aren't organized locally. Then I think you're talking about something that's much more difficult because their whole structure is not democratic. Essentially there's a self-perpetuating board. I mean, if all their members quit they'd go out of business, but if their members want XYZ that doesn't necessarily effect what they do. There's no feedback mechanism. I don't look at it as mainstream versus not mainstream, but its about democratic or is it connected to the grassroots versus not? And a lot of these groups have no mechanism of connecting with the grassroots and they aren't inclined to develop one. And these groups I don't think their politics are going to change. They may give lip service but I don't see how it could change fundamentally.

I: It seems that linking those two would be beneficial. That is, the mainstream policy makers inside the beltway and the locals?

L: I don't think the mainstreams are very good at what they're doing as a general rule. I've lobbied and I've helped change rules. I go back to a housing example. The National Alliance of HUD Tenants was changing laws and getting appropriations, getting money, which is usually the hardest thing to do. It's easier to change a law than it is to get a legislator to spend money on your behalf. Because there could be a lot of laws out there, but there's only so much money. They were doing this in the 1980s in the Bush administration when most low-income advocacy groups were on the retreat for 10-12 years and were losing most of their battles. They did it because they had a grassroots based approach, but also a strategic focused approach when they went after something they wanted and they applied their grassroots strength in a

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strategic focused way in exactly the right spot. They went after 3 or 4 Republican members of the appropriations committee, and they confronted them and they made them change their positions. So they got successful changes when a lot of these other groups were losing on welfare and hunger programs and so on. So I don't think the inside the beltway approach works.

I: I agree.

L: So to say we should bring together these two different aspects I don't think is right. They need to step back. They need to get out of the way, frankly. Or, take their resources and reapply them. Again, groups that have more grassroots resources, to move back in that direction. The labor movement is a prime example. The labor movement 20 years ago was not oriented toward grassroots activism. I think that's a fair statement. Now there's a commitment by AFL-CIO and on down through a lot of the unions to grassroots activism. So there's an organization that changes too. Now of course AFL-CIO always had locals, always had a grassroots base, but they weren't using it. They weren't respecting it. They weren't trusting it, and now they learned that if they're not going to, they're not going to survive. The environmental movement overall has a grassroots base, but some groups are much less linked to that than others. And some groups that don't trust it don't resonate with it. Now whether those groups can change...it doesn't really matter to me if the groups change. I don't have any need to have particular groups disappear or continue to exist. A group is a group. I've been involved with plenty of organizations that no longer exist. There's nothing sacred about an organization. If the organization can change and modify and connect with a grassroots base then beautiful. If they can't, I don't know what their purpose is any more. I think that in the 70s and clearly into the 80s it was possible to accomplish a lot of things by advocacy with democrats in congress as potential power, by advocating with folks in the presidential administration or going to court, and also by going to the media. All of those avenues are much less successful than they were 20 years ago, because the people...the corporations are not dumb, and they closed those avenues down. I remember when you could get on national TV and make radical statements. That ended 30 years ago, because they realized they were actually being harmed when somebody like Huey Newton, or Abbey Hoffman--not that those guys did everything right--but they had an impact on people. When the women's movement got on TV and said things, there was a resonance out there and people were saying, "hey, I get that" or "I can relate to that." And so they said we're not going to do that anymore. Now Noam Chomsky can't get on national TV. This guy whose considered the greatest living linguist, a philosopher, and all this sort of thing, a professor at MIT, and he can't even get on national TV. He's respected all over the world because of his political opinions. But he can't get on national TV because he's too radical. They made that decision and their closing off other avenues--closing the courts. This decision around Bush vs. Gore makes that obvious. They're going to decide whatever they want to decide for their benefit. And obviously

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Congress is much less successful. So it really pushes you back to organizing--back to grassroots.

I: In that sense they're forcing people to democratize.

L: Yeah right, Seattle, the anti-WTO thing, came about because people had no other option. The labor movement didn't particularly want to get together with environmentalists--didn't want to be involved with what was happening there. I mean, some did, I know some very militant labor people but Sweeney didn't want to do that. He'd rather be talking to Bill Clinton and for Bill Clinton to give him what he wants. But Bill Clinton absolutely, positively wouldn't do it. John Sweeney saw that labor jobs were going to go down the drain very rapidly and that he had no access on policy to democrats, let alone Republicans. And so he had to support something like Seattle. And the same thing with a lot of mainstream environmentalists, and Nader people. Nader is a radical guy in a lot of ways, but he hasn't been leading people out in the street. But Nader people were a key part of organizing that thing, again, because they saw no other option. So yeah, what you're getting is a situation in which the middle is disappearing because these guys are so greedy, so short sighted, that it's either my way or the highway. This whole area that you could play in the 70s, even the 80s to some extent, where you could have access to those in power and get some deals, or work some things out--that's all disappearing.

I: Yeah, the history of contemporary environmentalism tells the same story. When Reagan came into office and just gutted the EPA, they couldn't play the game that they normally played. It became negotiate and compromise--they got corporate people on the boards of mainstream environmental organizations.

L: Yeah that's one of the reasons I got out of the housing movement. When Gingrich took over they said you got to learn to speak Republican. I said no, you've got to apply power to this guy. You've got to get this guy to do what you want, not what he wants. And the fact is, it doesn't matter if people are Republicans or Democrats--you can organize. I've seen it. We've already worked with a local group that has won a battle against Christy Todd Whitman. She was going to stop cleaning up a Superfund site and folks organized. It was across the board. It was the local government, there were people out there with signs too, they turned her around. She realized that this was going to look really bad. Of course, they've already done grotesque environmental things. She backed off. And the dioxin thing is still moving forward...unlike global warming, POPs stuff is moving forward. The dioxin stuff is moving forward. I think where people are organizing and focused...I don't think anyone is doing that on global warming. It really is mobilizing grassroots people and it's not an easy issue to mobilize grassroots people on, but I think there are ways to do it.

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I: That's something I've been thinking about on my project because you know global warming is something that everyone can relate to. Let's face it people are motivated by risk or harm.

L: If you did a global warming campaign you'd think strategically about who would be the most hurt. An example would be coastal cities, particularly cities that are at risk of storms. If someone were working this at the national level...you have an organizer in Charleston saying, "remember Hugo? Well, we're asking for more Hugos." You have an organizer in southern Florida and you say, "remember Andrew? This guy is asking for more Andrews." You talk to people in low-lying areas, with beach property. You talk to the insurance companies...you strategically think about who in particular would move first. In particular...who would be George W. Bush's face today, not 20 years from now when the shit totally hits the fan, but who would get in now. And you talk to those people, then you find your allies, and you may have strange allies--maybe the Red Cross. Who knows? But you bring that together and you exercise power. What people are doing now is saying that it's everybody's issue, everybody's against it. We...that never works. When I was talking to a group yesterday in Wisconsin; they got 1700 people that signed a petition. They're getting frustrated because it's only like 10-12 of them that are carrying the weight of the organization. I said well forget about the 1700, that's your core group; that's your ocean, but you look for an individual person to head up a committee... You don't organize by saying all 1700 people stand up and come over here. It won't happen, and that's what people are doing with global warming. Everybody says we should all care about this so let's all write to George Bush. And they say well someone else will do it and no one does it. You've got to have a strategic focused campaign. You got to use actual people to make actual social change. Social change doesn't happen in the abstract. That's because there are particular groups...look at the French revolution; you look at anything. There are particular groups that moved at a particular time and their motion resonated with a bunch of other people and a larger group moved and if it resonated with everybody then eventually everybody moved, but they didn't all move at once. It wasn't like everyone got up on July the 14th and said lets overthrow the monarchy. There was a process that happened; all those people aren't thinking about that process.

I: So you don't know of any grassroots groups that deal with global warming?

L: Nothing stands out to me. The most effective stuff I've seen is overseas, where there are people organizing boycotts of American corporations which they consider the most complicit in these decisions...boycotts are really tough. We are not big on boycotts here but that's the most strategic thing I've seen. Most of what I've seen on global warming is pandering and saying everyone should do something.

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I: By putting pressure on corporations at the local level do you see corporations moving to developing countries?

L: I'm sure some of it that is happening. Now a landfill that's not necessarily practical. There's some waste that can be shipped overseas, but I think what you're talking about is probably a cost break point. Before you put garbage on a boat and send it to Namibia, it's cheaper to start recycling. This is not to say we don't have to watch these issues, and that's why we're connected internationally. And that's why we're encouraging good practices in other countries. Both Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) and IPEN are both involved in encouraging positive environmental practices in grassroots groups. And there are grassroots groups in India and Africa that are fighting these issues and they're being successful. I spent a long time at one of the IPEN meetings with a guy from India--one of the southern states of India where they've stopped 2 or 3 incinerators through grassroots action.

I: India does have a pretty good grassroots tradition.

L: Yeah right, the tradition is there and you just have to get some of the technical information. Parts of India have a very high level of education. There is a certain kind of democracy there. HCWH and IPEN are working with folks from Africa, Latin America and all over, so we are very aware. This is not about getting it out of my backyard (Our magazine is called "Everyone's Backyard"). But at the same time you don't let something bad happen here just because if you stop it here it may go somewhere else.

I: At least make them pay for the move.

L: Yeah, pay for the move and set an example. When we have a win we spread the word...when communities contact us, we say, yeah this has been done somewhere else. And the argument that if you stop it here it will go somewhere else is: a) a fallacious argument; b) its used consciously against local organizers. So we tell people that's not your responsibility. You're responsibility is to take care of your space. Sometimes groups will say: "put it over there instead"--but we urge them not to say that. Not because its not morally proper or correct, but its strategically a bad idea. Because then you end up with two communities fighting each other. You just say: "this is not a good place for that, we're not going to let you put it here, period." The reality is this strategy--nuclear power plants being a prime example, there have been no new nuclear power plants in the US since 1979. It's perfectly legal. There are procedures for approving a new nuclear power plant. There's money out there. There are people that want to do it. You see them salivating right now with Bush in power, but they haven't been able to do it for 21 years. Why? Because there isn't a community in this country that you could go to and say we'd like to put in a nuclear power plant, where they wouldn't fight you tooth and nail. For decades they haven't

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been able to put in a nuclear power plant, so in that sense we stopped up the toilet as far as new nuclear plants in the US...and we've come pretty close to doing that with incinerators. There aren't a lot of new incinerators.

I: By stopping up the toilet for new incinerators its forced technological alternatives, right?

L: It has tended to force technological alternatives because you're raising the price and the problem with technological alternatives is that when you bring them in they're expensive. A lot of these technological alternatives, if they were used widely, would be as cheap as incinerators, but at the beginning they're much more expensive and people aren't used to them...so if you raise the cost of incinerators you make it easier to bring in alternatives. You also create situations where those alternatives will be used. In one of the first EJ fights in Warren County, NC. They took PCBs from all over the state and dumped it on the roads in the poorest, blackest county in the state. And people fought really hard to stop it, but it went ahead. But they got a commitment at the time, that if there was ever available technology the state would come back and clean it up. It happened that Hunt became governor again about 18 years later...the promise was brought to his attention. By then, some technologies had been developed and now that dump is being cleaned up with a non-incineration, non-landfill technology chosen by that community at substantial research working with scientists and so on...That technology is now happening there. So politically they forced the situation where that technology is now used. Australia has a policy for things like POPs. They only use non-incineration, non-landfill technologies. The reason is Australia is not a big country. They don't have a lot of these, so that just trying to find a place to put these... They picked a spot and they had this incredible battle. They get a lot of support from all over the country, and finally they were forced to adopt these new technologies. So we are very concretely pushing for these new technologies to be brought into use. They're much less destructive. They're not perfect either but when you've got POPs out there you've got to do something with them other than just stick them in the ground and pretend they're going to go away or burn them, which just creates new POPs. So those new technologies are emerging and they are emerging precisely *not* because science is coming up with new ideas or because industry is creative, but because political pressure from the grassroots has concretely brought these new technologies into use.

I: And that's exactly why I'm here. Because organization like CHEJ are democratizing technology. They are forcing corporations to adopt more sustainable technologies.

L: I will make a distinction. There has to be someone developing new technologies. God bless them whoever they are, and some of those people are entrepreneurial. The technologies for both these POP situations I mentioned in Australia and NC--those

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were both developed by small companies...that are trying to take something that someone developed in a lab somewhere...the fact is, that until there was political pressure there was no market. And those companies are very shaky...there's so many people out there with technological skills that if you force a situation where the power structure has to find a solution--they can find a solution...

I: Like with Dupont and the CFCs and the ozone problem...

L: But it has to be strategic; it has to be focused. That's why HCWH is so exciting, because they really are transforming the industry. I'm not saying it's simple or easy, but compared to what a lot of people are doing they're just rolling right through the medical industry. It's not all that complex in term of changing the use of PVC...or mercury. Some amazing strides have been made. If you look at other industries or sectors you just don't see this happening. Automobiles you know, all the ideas are out there. There's no reason that all the automobiles aren't getting 70 mpg...and all kinds of other things. Well, it's not happening because no one is strategically focusing to make it happen. I'm not saying that the auto industry wouldn't be harder than the health care industry but the health care industry is not easy.

I: I wonder if that's because there's so much money in health care?

L: No, I think it's because someone strategically went after the health care industry. I mean a lot of people have come up with ideas for the auto industry but no one is saying strategically what are we going to do--looking at it as a political problem. People look at these as technological problems and that's why I gave you so much grief. You know the problem with the auto industry producing so many SUVs is not a technological problem; it's a political problem.

I: The average mpg has dropped over the past 15 years because of the SUVs.

L: Right, they have this stupid loophole that an SUV is not considered a passenger car. Obviously, in any rational system that loophole would have been closed about 15 minutes after it was opened. But the fact is there's a lot of people that want to sell a lot of gasoline...a lot of big cars. They work together and they've got some key members of Congress in place...but there's no body saying: "who has the power to change this"? Its like we say to people when they call up. First, we figure out what you want, what's the solution to your problem, then you form a group, then you figure out who can give you what you want, and then you apply pressure until they do it. Now if we had the same process applied to the automobile industry. First, who wants to do something about this, and then what are we going to try to do? Then, who do we go after to apply pressure to? I mean this country is politically illiterate. That's the bottom line. Technologically we're real smart, but politically we don't know shit.

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I: Right, but you put pressure on the auto industry and they'll say: "This is what our customers want."

L: But maybe it's not even the auto industry that you put pressure on. Maybe you go after the Department of Transportation. There are a lot of different ways to approach this. The thing about HCWH is there's this creative process of how do you change things. The angle is HC "*Without Harm*". The name of the organization itself is a strategy. Because all health care workers at least claim...all claim that they are trying to do this without harm. So when you say that, this is a challenge. We know you're harming people, and we know you can't admit it so we're putting you right in the middle of that contradiction...it's having a technique involved particularly for them. They think for the people in Washington they have the kind of things that they do. But what the people in Washington do is pretty simple. Anybody can learn it. I lobbied one session of the general assembly in VA, and I figured out how it all worked. There are some rules...but people don't think that if I want something to change, or my community wants something to change, or my class wants something to change, they have to think through a strategic process of how that works. Without idealizing people in other countries, I think they're more aware of that. One reason is because the white majority has gotten away with not having to do a lot of stuff...sometime in the '70s the rules changed. The power structure started squeezing people here too. So people are having to learn what people of color, Latin Americans, what people in Europe knew about all along, which is how to think strategically. As you change your social circumstances, who are your allies? Where's your target? Those kinds of things? We also don't have a Left tradition in this country.

I: Yeah, I think there is more of a populist tradition here.

L: Yeah, when I say Left, I'm talking in a very broad sense...When a kid grows up in France or Germany they know in some sense that there are people out there that think about class and power and are always trying to strengthen the lower classes relative to the upper classes...

T: Partly do to the parliamentary versus the two party system.

L: Yeah, the two party system does create this bipolar problem...but anyway, people in this country who don't have that experience don't think strategically about how do I make things change. In addition we've got some whole new arenas that people didn't have before. This whole question of environmental change. Macro-global environmental change that wasn't an issue 100 years ago. We weren't changing the environment to any significant degree and now we are...so we have to think about that in a way we didn't before. And thinking about that politically does require some new kind of thinking. You have to be able to think politically period, and most

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Americans have a hard time doing that. People call me, and they want to go to court where basically some technological professional will solve their problem for them when they don't understand. They want a scientist to come in and say this is what should happen, which actually scientists don't do that, but people don't understand that because they don't actually know much about science. Or...they just want somebody to be a hero and come in from the outside and solve their problems and they don't have any technical grasp of how they can do it themselves. That's really what we're doing at a very elementary level is getting the message across--"yes, you can do it yourselves; we work with lots of people just like you; its not that hard, it's a lot of work, but its not beyond any normal persons capacity..."

I: How do you actually put pressure on corporations in a legal sense?

L: What do you mean, in a legal sense?

I: Do you use the public hearing process to get enough resistance and stop it right there? Or what if it's an existing case where there's an established polluter, corporation and you need some kind of scientific information, data?

L: Well, you're always going to need some kind of scientific information, mostly for your own group. People have to feel that they actually know what they're talking about. You've got to have some scientific information, just like if you're going to go down to the bank you have to have some information about finance.

I: But specific to that corporation that's polluting, where does the information come from?

L: People can develop this to a large extent themselves. Our science director, Stephen Lester...Stephen's available to anybody who contacts us about science situations. Now with the Internet, people can develop a lot of this information themselves. One of the critical lessons that Stephen talks about and certainly I talk about is don't over load yourself on the science. In other words...

I: Don't get caught up in it?

L: Yeah, if you have something that is known to be toxic, say you've got arsenic, and you know that there's arsenic in the landfill and that there are elevated levels of arsenic in wells outside the landfill, you don't need to know anything else. Stop right there. Some people will need to know more and some people in your group will be motivated to know a lot more, but in terms of your basic message--stop right there. Because when the environmental regulators come to you they say: "Well, you know there's a gradient here, or..." You can say wait a minute, stop. We already know the

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deal. There's arsenic in there. It's getting out, and it's in our wells. Is that true or not?

I: But how do you know it came from there?

L: Well, you know you have to have some sense that there's not arsenic around. Again, you do some basic research, but...

I: And who does that?

L: The group basically. We're talking about, if you don't have that simple of a case you're probably not going to win anyway, because you can't make the case to your community, and that's where you really have to make the case.

I: The group would hire someone, or take the samples themselves?

L: No, most of the time the regulators have the information, or the polluter has the information already. Information is not the hard part. The hard part is getting people to stop collecting information. Really, this is practically universal--very few groups that I've worked with that didn't have more information than they needed. Usually the information is with the regulators. That's probably the clearest answer to your question. The regulator has usually done enough to figure out there's a problem. They haven't done enough to satisfy themselves that there's a problem because their job is not to find a problem. Their job is to keep studying and say--"there are problems on both sides and we're going to look at it, talk to the polluter, slap them on the wrists a little bit..." It'll never be resolved. Eventually the group will dissolve, or get sick and move away, die, or whatever. That's the regulators job. But the regulator has the information and the group can get the information, because its public information. The answer to your question, how do you go after the corporation is there's no one answer. It depends on the situation. When I talk to people, what I'm primarily doing is going through power relationships. And I'm figuring out that essential question--who has the power to do what you need? Maybe its local government, maybe state government, federal government, maybe the corporation itself, maybe some combination. It may be the people themselves have the power to stop it through some way. I mean, there are a lot of different situations.

I: But how do you keep it from turning into a battle over scientific data, where one group of experts says this and another says that?

L: You make sure that your strategy doesn't depend on that.

I: So how do you do that? How do you avoid that?

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L: You get your facts together and you focus them at the most basic level. Not inaccurate, not fuzzy, but basic. This is over here, arsenic is probably not...well, if it's highly concentrated arsenic, that doesn't occur naturally. You say you've got this arsenic here, and nobody around here is dealing with arsenic, and it's the same arsenic that's in our wells. Can you absolutely prove that arsenic came from there? No, if we go to court, or we just go to public hearings, then we could spend the next 20 years saying: "well, maybe that arsenic came from the moon, or maybe that arsenic came from somewhere else, or maybe its not exactly the same arsenic--'look at these little fractures down here'." But you see if the average person in the community gets it...that's what you need. Your base is with you. You're never going to convince the regulators. It doesn't matter what the regulators think. The company already knows they did it. You don't have to worry about convincing the company. You convince the base and then you mobilize the base to apply political pressure where political pressure needs to be applied...

I: But what prevents the corporation from coming back and saying: "there's no..."

L: Oh they will! They're going to say that. It doesn't matter if your base believes you. If your base is with you. In other words, you don't put it to the test. For one thing, there's a misunderstanding about what science does. I'm not a scientist, but science doesn't resolve these questions to the hundredth percentile. Real scientists don't claim it does. So all scientists can do is give you more information. But they can't say this is absolutely the way it is...its like you were organizing around a stop sign. That's the classic Saul Linsky organizing question. We want a stop sign on our corner because the cars go right through and run over our kids. There are people who work with the numbers to figure out exactly where stop signs are supposed to go. But if a community decides "dam it we don't care, we want a stop sign there"--then they can get a stop sign. Even though there are people out there who make their living figuring out where the stop signs go who will come in and say: "technically there's not enough traffic; nobody has been run over yet..." [Community's response:] "We don't care we want a stop sign, and we're going to keep raising a fuss until we get a stop sign"...if the people believe it...That's why I believe there has to be a group. Because if there's just one person, they may say...but a group is not going to believe something like that. You got 20 or 30 people together in a community, then I trust them, because I believe in democracy.

I: What about the ones who castrated themselves to go to meet the mother ship?

L: I'm not talking about a group that's isolated itself. I'm talking about a community of people not self-selected, that just happen to live in the same place. I say if those people get together, look at the evidence and they come to a conclusion, I'm willing to trust them with the conclusion. I'm not willing to say you could determine what happens the rest of human history, all of human life, but I'm willing to say "I trust you

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guys to figure out the best thing for that community, because you live there. It's your health at stake, and I'll trust you to do that." Particularly when the only other choice is to trust somebody who is only there to make a buck. There's no evidence at all that he cares, or that he's right about anything, because the regulators just waffle between those two...