

Romic: Hazardous to Our Health

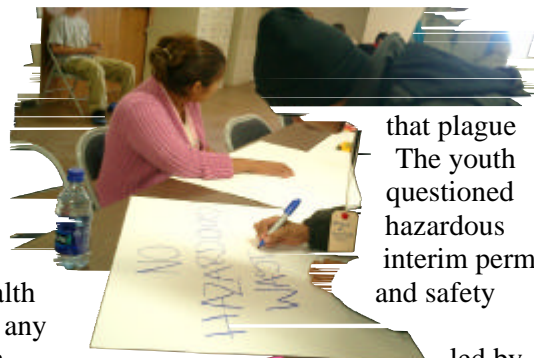
By Jessica Tovar & Joanna Wead



On April 2nd & 3rd 2004 Gila River Alliance for a Clean Environment (GRACE) and Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice hosted a youth conference which brought together youth from three communities currently experiencing environmental injustice by corporate polluters and the U.S. government. Romic Southwest has two facilities; one is located near Chandler Arizona on the Gila River Indian Community reservation, and the other in an urban Latino community in East Palo Alto, California. Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) from Parker Arizona currently has a hazardous waste facility run by Westates Carbon/ U.S Filter. All three

facilities emit pollution to the air, water, and soil and expose the communities to dangerous toxic chemicals. This is a prime example of Environmental Racism, a pattern and practice that includes the deliberate targeting of polluting industries in low-income communities of color.

At this conference youth ages 7-24 years old came from the Gila River Indian Community, the Colorado River Indian Tribes, Children for a Safe Environment and Greenaction Arizona. The youth made connections from hazardous waste facilities on their reservations to chronic illnesses these two native communities; diabetes, reproductive harm and cancer. also learned who the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is and why Romic Southwest has been allowed to have leaking drums of waste on the reservation. Romic Southwest has been operating on an on Gila River for over 29 years and has repeatedly had violations of the health standards of the EPA, yet the EPA has NEVER fined Romic Southwest for any violations. Tribal members at the Colorado River Indian Tribes reservation – the Mohave Cultural Preservation Program – are working to evict the Westates/US Filter hazardous waste plant from their lands.



that plague The youth questioned hazardous interim permit and safety

The youth also learned that polluting industry exploits native sovereignty by operating on land where city and county laws do not apply. Some youth expressed that they had no idea what Romic Southwest was doing on their reservation, but now armed with the facts, they are working with their elders to shut Romic Southwest down. Such knowledge that the youth connected this weekend has enabled them to become the next community leaders against environmental racism. On Saturday Morning, the following day, the youth took action.

“Fry Bread Yes, Romic Southwest NO,” chanted the youth! On Saturday April 3rd, the first-ever protest against the Romic Southwest hazardous waste facility took place at the entrance of the industrial park on the Gila River Indian Community



reservation. About 30 persons, mostly native youth from Gila River and Colorado River Indian Tribes – along with Greenaction - rallied against the environmental injustice on Gila River. Many other community members from the Gila River Casino across the street came out to support the youth despite some clouds and drizzle. As the sun came out the youth continued chanting and talking about how EPA and Romic Southwest disregard the health of the native community. Many of the youth testified that their own family members suffered from diabetes and cancer. This was the reason why they chanted, “Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Romic has got to Go!” Simultaneously, a solidarity action was taking place in East Palo Alto, CA where Romic Southwest has another facility also located in a low-income, community of color.



On Saturday April 3rd Youth United for Community Action (YUCA), a grassroots community-organization created, led, and run by young people of color out of East Palo Alto organized a rally and march in solidarity with the Gila River protest. With a turn out of over 60 people, most of who were under the age of 25, the group gathered at the East Palo Alto city hall where short speeches were made by YUCA members, John Mataka who represented the Grayson Neighborhood Council and Greenaction, and community residents. The group then marched to the sister facility of the Gila River Romic Southwest plant located in East Palo Alto, stopping to chant in front of residential apartments and receiving many cheers and honks from residents passing by along the way.

When the group reached the Romic facility it looked all but inviting with chain link fences surrounding the entrance topped with barbed wire and wooden panels. The group chanted more slogans like “1 2 3 4, Romic has got to go!” and “The Youth united with never be defeated!” before quieting down for more speeches and a rap performance by a YUCA member in Spanish. The speakers touched on many issues from their own personal fears and concerns of living near a hazardous waste facility, to environmental racism, and a health survey conducted by Yuca members to determine the overall status of the people’s health in East Palo Alto. Youth Staff member Cindy spoke about her frustrations with having to worry about a hazardous waste facility in her community and how it was affecting her and her family’s health on top of all the concerns of a regular teenager like getting into college and just being a kid. She told the crowd of her mother’s vegetable garden that the family ate from and how she worried that the food that they raised could be making them sick from being grown in soil that was contaminated by a flood a couple years ago. She feels outraged that her family cannot even grow their own food or drink water from the tap without fear of developing cancer or some other type of disease.



Other speakers touched on the issue of environmental racism, which includes the practice of selecting communities of lower income and color for the placement of polluting industries and facilities. Both residents of the Gila River Indian Community and East Palo Alto feel that they are being made victims of environmental racism by the placement of hazardous waste facilities in their communities, and by weak enforcement and regulation by the U.S. government and other governmental agencies. Romic’s very own website states that East Palo Alto “possesses a multi-ethnic population which includes a large number of Hispanics and Pacific Islanders” with 69 percent of the population made up Latinos, 41.5 percent African American, 12 percent non-Hispanic white, and 9 percent Asian and Pacific Islander. Romic’s website also admits that “education level is lower than average for the Bay Area” with “17 percent of residents living below poverty level” and being “characterized as having an excessive crime rate since the 1950s”.¹ Many residents feel that they are being targeted by Romic because of these factors and that it is not bettering their communities in any way, shape or form by having the factory there.



During the summer of 2002 YUCA launched a small-scale pilot health survey targeting 250-300 East Palo Alto youth from the ages 13-21. The most disturbing statistic found was that 26.4% (64 out of 257 people) had asthma. Several speakers noted this during their speeches and said that they felt this was proof of how unhealthy and contaminated East Palo Alto is and that the Romic facility is only adding to it. The rally in East Palo Alto ended with free food and drinks provided by YUCA and a chapter of Food Not Bombs.

Bombs.

Greenaction is proud to help unite diverse communities in the fight for health, justice and a clean environment.

Jessica Tovar is a Greenaction Community and Youth Organizer and Joanna Wead is a Greenaction intern & student at San Francisco State University
 Photos by Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice and Youth United for Community Action

¹Rigenhagen, Rhonda. "A History of East Palo Alto." Romic Southwest Environmental Technologies Corp. 1 July 1993. 7 Apr. 2004 <<http://www.RomicSouthwest.com/epahistory/frame.htm>>.