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Seeing Smokestacks, Dreaming Of Blue Skies!

By [Maryruth Belsey Priebe](#) on April 20, 2010 [From Restoration campaign](#)



Members of the North Richmond community in the San Francisco Bay Area are being asked to choose between clean air, healthy families, and good jobs. But the Laotian people of North Richmond are having none of it. Working together as members of the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP), the Laotian community in Richmond, including Mien, Hmong, Lao, and Khmu, are rising up against big oil and fighting their own city to win the right to control their environment and gain the breathing room they need to restore their polluted air, land, and water.

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Chevron is perhaps the biggest target of LOP's advocacy work. According to a community support letter published by the LOP, industry produces 90% of Richmond's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and Chevron is responsible for 90% of that total. And that's just GHG pollution; these numbers don't account for other air pollution that comes with the refinement of oil.

"It's terrible," explains Sandy Saeturn, one of the founding members and lead organizers for the LOP in Richmond, CA. "For generations, Chevron has been pumping billions of tons of toxics into our backyards, leaving our communities – mostly working class African American, Latino, and Asian communities—with a legacy of cancer, asthma, and other respiratory illnesses." A Transportation and Land Use Coalition report states that asthma rates in Richmond are two and a half times higher than populations in the rest of the county, with children of color four and a half times more likely to be hospitalized.

So in 1995, Torm Nompraseurt, Sandy Saeturn, and other community members began to organize themselves. They started by recruiting youth to be part of their newly-formed Asian Youth Advocates program (AYA) to build young leaders. This soon blossomed into a parents' education program and other initiatives, until 1999 when their focus turned to solving the problem of refinery pollution after a big Chevron explosion.

"The explosion had released so many toxins into the air," remembers Nompraseurt. "But instead of sheltering in place [going indoors, closing doors and windows and waiting for the air pollution to dissipate], our community was out on the streets,

talking to neighbors and trying to figure out what was going on.” Language barriers were a challenge, leaving many families vulnerable and at greatest risk for exposure to the toxic pollutants.

But instead of adjusting refinery policies and procedures to prevent such disasters, Chevron has simply tried to cover up the problem by throwing money at it. Saeturn explains: “They profit every day at the expense of our health. When there’s a big oil spill or an accident, they’ll pay people off. For example, I’ve lived in Richmond my whole life. When I turned 18, I got \$4,000 for potential health impacts from living near the refinery.”

They also contribute money to the City of Richmond for programs that benefit the community in the hopes that it will give them permission to pollute. “For Chevron, this money is a drop in the bucket. For us, we have to suffer from the health problems they create our entire lives and a few dollars doesn’t change that.”

Since the big explosion, the LOP has won a major victory — the establishment of a multi-lingual warning system for Richmond in 2000. But the situation is about to get much worse for the people of this community. Chevron filed a Refinery Expansion project request in 2008 in an attempt to get approval for the refinement of even dirtier crude that would produce even greater quantities of GHG emissions and air pollution.



The LOP is putting up a strong fight. In July, they won a court case that put the refinery expansion on hold. Now, they’re hoping to win the appeal to stop the expansion permanently.

But the people of Richmond and the leaders of LOP don’t feel they can turn their attention to the clean-up efforts sorely needed in their community until polluters like Chevron can be stopped. “First we need to make sure that companies like Chevron don’t pump even more toxics into the air we breathe every day,” says Saeturn.

When that day finally comes, they have big dreams for their local environment. They envision being able to plant food gardens, freely drink water from local reserves, and spend time outside without fear of toxic clouds reigning down on them.

There is much to hope for. Through the LOP, young leaders developed such as Lena Phan will continue to fight until their city is safe. “I want our city to provide cleaner, greener jobs for my friends and family who are scraping by on unemployment in these tough economic times,” says Phan. “My hope is that one day Chevron will help our communities become healthier. I want to look up into a beautiful blue sky, not incinerators of smoke or toxics from the refinery.”

Sources:

Transportation and Land Use Coalition. (2003). *Cleaning the Air, Growing Smarter*. Retrieved April 12, 2010, from TransForm: <http://transformca.org/files/reports/cleaning-air-growing-smarter.pdf>

This was [Seeing Smokestacks, Dreaming Of Blue Skies!](#), an entry in our [Restoration Campaign](#) from April 20, 2010. It was filed under [Air](#)

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