

# QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

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## **Quaker Eco-Justice Strategy: Equality and the Experiment of the Earth Quaker Action Team** **George Lakey**

*Any great change must expect opposition because it shakes the very foundation of privilege.*

—Lucretia Mott

What if it turned out that a time-honored Friends testimony, a success story in northwestern Europe, and an experiment by contemporary eco-justice Quakers, all turned out to be in alignment?

In the midst of the painfully hierarchical 17th century, Friends acted out their vision of social equality. In the 20th century Norwegians built equality into their national version of a “holy experiment.” And now, the Earth Quaker Action Team is asserting bold connections between equality and the needs of the planet. Those three moments in time add up to encouragement and a fresh angle on strategy.

The encouragement, ironically, starts with confronting the reality of social class. What I’ve found in years of doing diversity workshops with Friends is that the challenges brought by the testimony of equality bring us both resistance and relief. Resistance? Because we’ve all been socialized into oppressive patterns, and that’s our comfort zone. Relief? Because part of us always knows that those patterns are wrong, and we walk a bit taller when we’re tackling instead of avoiding the work.

When I think back to how challenged I was by the black freedom movement, then the women’s movement, and then the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transsexual (LGBT) movement (even though I’m gay), I remember both my resistance and relief.

At the beginning of a workshop on social class one Friend said, “Surely we’ve had enough of dealing with privilege! Who wants to tackle yet another way that inequality messes us up?”

A belly laugh from other Friends greeted the statement. One said, “But maybe we can learn something from what we’ve already tackled!”

When I read about Friends refusing to doff their hats to their “superiors,” or use titles, or use the pronouns that the authorities and the rich demanded, I’m grateful for that Quaker clarity. They knew that class is a biggie. Actually, they might be surprised at our attempt to maintain a culture of silence about it.

Maybe we should make billionaire Warren E. Buffett an honorary Friend for his breaking through the silence in such a plain-spoken way. He found that he paid a lower percentage of his income in taxes than the secretaries and clerks in his office. “There’s class warfare, all right,” Buffett said, “but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”<sup>1</sup>

At the 2011 Friends General Conference Gathering over eighty Friends from around the country were bursting with stories about how the rich are winning in their states—not just in Wisconsin, although Madison Friends might have bigger bruises than some.

Not all rich people actively support policies that hurt the rest of us. Bill Gates’ dad makes public statements asking to be taxed more and, hopefully, there are wealthy Quakers who are adding their names to the list being compiled by Responsible Wealth/United for a Fair Economy.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Buffett does know his class better than I do. Eco-justice organizers need to know too, because as Ed Dreby contends, dealing with climate change will require very great economic change. The quote above from Lucretia Mott puts these two realities together.

As the privileged have become more savvy about what climate change really implies, their opposition has become much more aggressive. Even our ecological President (pragmatist that he is) left climate change out of the State of the Union Speech in 2011.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce (controlled by Warren Buffett’s class) opposes measures that would increase environmental sustainability, provide good universal health care, keep middle class families in the cities, give working class families a chance, and provide full employment. Only a class analysis can predict the stands the Chamber takes.

The Chamber spent more on the 2010 election than the Republican and Democratic National Committees combined. The result is that the already staggering gap in the U.S. between the rich and the poor is steadily increasing, which gets the testimonies section of the “Quaker Meter” flashing more insistently than an ambulance light.

### **Vision: Good news from Norway on the equality front**

People of faith are not required to have assurance of success before embarking on a great task. The early Friends who tackled the Puritan theocracy of colonial Massachusetts certainly didn’t have any! Still, as someone who has pursued some lost causes in my time, I do cheer up when I learn that someone, somewhere, has made a gain.

Even after Norwegian Quakers left their country for more hospitable lands, Norway still had some people who had a vision of equality. At the beginning of the twentieth century their country was terribly poor—a majority lived in slums and rural poverty. Only three percent of Norway could grow food; the climate was rough; it had few natural resources; and its population of three million gave it a very small internal market. The main ways Norway learned to earn income—fishing, lumbering, using its water power to refine aluminum, building and operating merchant ships—left it at the mercy of global market forces like the rise and fall of the price of wood.

**Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB)** is published bi-monthly by Quaker Earthcare Witness (formerly FCUN) as an insert in *BeFriending Creation*.

The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an Earth restored.

**QEB's** purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the Earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to Earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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Norway's homogeneity (mostly white Lutherans) reduced the creativity that would be more available in a culturally diverse nation. Norway had a small group of very rich owners and a fairly small middle class; most Norwegians were workers and farmers. The income difference between the rich and the poor was dramatic. A vision of equality, however, lived.

The workers, with allies, mobilized a large-scale nonviolent struggle to change the class situation. Seven decades later (the 1970s, before Norway's oil-drilling in the North Sea), Norway had virtually eliminated poverty, put everyone into decent housing, provided good free health care for all, provided free university education, created a flourishing infrastructure despite the ice and snow, provided for everyone's decent retirement, created a full employment economy, and other achievements too numerous to mention here.

They did this even though they suffered a devastating war with Germany and an occupation that set them back economically, a time when the U.S. economy prospered. Now, in comparison with the U.S., Norway has higher productivity and is running ahead of its Kyoto climate change agreements. It is also one of the highest *per capita* contributors to development in the Global South and support for the UN.

How did the Norwegians do this? They went ahead and nonviolently fought the class war. The people won, put the economic elite out of political power, and took control of the direction of the economy.

Making the power shift wasn't easy; when the privileged called out the troops, people got hurt and lives were lost. However, Norwegian workers didn't allow their fear to get the best of them; they used their nonviolent weapons of strikes, boycotts and protests to end the political domination of the super-rich. When the working class with its allies took charge, Norway was able to make a national decision to abolish poverty and move beyond a society of dramatic class difference.<sup>3</sup>

Norwegian economists then worked mainly for the working class instead of the super-rich, and found that overcoming poverty is not rocket science. The dozens of concrete economic tools they used to move toward equality are available.<sup>4</sup> The Swedes and Danes also confronted their super-rich and took similar strides toward equality. They created more equality and well-being than the U.S. without the lubrication of North Sea oil. All three countries in the mid-twentieth century freed themselves to pursue the common good by overcoming the resistance of Lucretia Mott's "privileged." Based on track record, overcoming is the only way it can be done.

In the 1970s, Norway faced the environmental challenge and gave leadership in the United Nations to wake up the rest of the world to climate change. The freedom they had to do that was no accident; they had pushed the super-rich out of power so the privileged couldn't prevent Norway from addressing a critical issue on the horizon, as they persistently do in the U.S.

Norway hasn't become a utopia. Breivik's murderous attack on the Labor Party in July 2011 reflects residual religious/racial intolerance that still lives in the Norwegian right wing. In the 1980s the neo-liberalism of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher became attractive enough for the Norwegian Conservatives to win power. The Conservatives de-regulated and allowed a financial bubble that drove Norway toward the cliff. Labor regained power, seized the banks that were most responsible for the disaster, fired the senior management, made sure stockholders couldn't benefit, and refused to bail out other banks. The result: while European and U.S. giants were reeling in 2007-08, the Norwegian financial sector was safe, because it had been cleansed by the democratic wisdom, hard-won from Norway's brief flirtation with neo-liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

Most Norwegians believe that the job of an economy is to create the experience of abundance for all; economics in the U.S. is called "the dismal science," because it is all about scarcity, a spiritual violation if there ever was one.

A few years ago the leadership of the city of Oslo became concerned about a trend of increasing car purchases, with attendant traffic, emissions, carbon footprint, etc. Their solution was to dramatically lower public transportation fares and increase service. The result was a decrease in car ownership and traffic! Even though Norway is one of the nations least threatened by climate change in the world, it has been an environmental leader. That's because it has freed itself from domination by the economic elite that elsewhere misleads and is devoted to inequality.

## Our opportunity: join the class struggle and open the space for democracy and environmental sanity.

Oppressive systems are stifling. The U.S. right-wing propaganda plays on our people's yearning for freedom. Freedom here is in short supply, unless by freedom you mean the variety of cereals on supermarket shelves. Social mobility is less in the capitalist U.S. than in the social democratic countries of Europe. U.S. Army recruiting is doing well these days; for so many people, there appears to be no other way out. Doors are closing. For many of us, including some Friends in our Meetings, life is getting tight.

Earth Quaker Action Team (EQAT—pronounced “Equate”) is looking for an experience of abundance: the renewal of joy in struggle, the rediscovery of community, the lived experience of grace. We sing about laying our burden down by the riverside. We want to open space for ourselves at the same time as we open space for society.

In 2010 some Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends decided to end their frustration with non-action and create a new organization. Their sense of urgency about climate change led them to reclaim the radical Quaker heritage of nonviolent direct action. They believed they needed a new group to act boldly in community.<sup>6</sup>

In class terms, EQAT opens the space by reaching outside the conditioning that holds Quakers back. Brought up owning class? Great—bring the gifts (vision, big picture, aesthetics) often cultivated in the owning class, and let go of the isolation and need to control. Brought up middle class? Great—bring the gifts (optimism about making an individual difference, process skills, articulateness) and let go of both the obsession to fit in and conflict aversion. Brought up working class? Great—bring the gifts (directness, passion and willingness to fight) and let go of the deference to “superiors” and the old label of “ignorant.”<sup>7</sup>

To Friends and others from whatever class, experience abundance in your group by reaching across class lines so you maximize the gifts you need to be successful in the work for eco-justice. Just as Norway would still be stuck in poverty, inequality, and terrible environmental policies if it had been up to the Norwegian middle class, Quakers who stay in their middle class bubble guarantee the ineffectiveness of which they complain.

Sociologist Betsy Leondar-Wright's study of U.S. social movements has shown that the more successful ones have been working-middle class coalitions; the less successful ones were single-class.<sup>8</sup> One of the joys for middle class activists can be unlearning stereotypes imposed on us by class culture. Who was in the demographic most opposed to the Vietnam War? People who didn't graduate from high school! Most college grads were very slow to figure out that the Vietnam War was wrong. What was the first mass membership organization to demand that the U.S. troops come home from Iraq? The AFL-CIO.<sup>9</sup>

Such facts raise the question, “But why do blue collar people make such a fuss about flags and patriotic bumper stickers when a new war starts?” The answer is that working class culture supports more active expression of one's beliefs. By contrast, middle class culture supports fitting in, being restrained. It was hard for nurses and teachers historically, to form unions, because they didn't want to appear “unprofessional” in the eyes of the world, since “professional” is performed by appearing smooth and not making waves.<sup>10</sup>

Even with the cliff edge of climate change staring middle class environmentalists in the face, most are reluctant to return to the strategy used in their biggest U.S. victory, which they won against

all odds, the 1970s nonviolent direct action campaign against nuclear power.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural differences between middle class and working class people often keep us apart, but already there are guidebooks that help us to learn to work together. Betsy Leondar-Wright's book is abundant with quotes and anecdotes. Linda Stout comes from many generations of Quakers and now leads the organization, Spirit in Action. Her book *Bridging the Class Divide*, is inspiring.<sup>12</sup>

Early Friends loved to open space to make room for Spirit, and they modeled how to accomplish the impossible when they won their campaign against the religious intolerance of theocratic, Puritan Massachusetts.<sup>13</sup> 18th century British Friends updated campaign technology to accomplish another impossible task: ending the slave trade on which an Empire appeared to depend.<sup>14</sup> How could either of those victories have been won without the power that is mobilized through a nonviolent direct action campaign?

Today's eco-justice Friends also face an “impossible” challenge. EQAT therefore turns to a strategic model that seems most promising, based on its track record—the nonviolent direct action campaign.

EQAT's first campaign is Bank Like Appalachia Matters! (BLAM!), focusing initially on mountaintop removal coal mining. It was carefully chosen in light of our strengths and weaknesses:

- 1) EQAT is new. Allies are eager to help and teach us.
- 2) We're small. The issue is well defined and on its way to winning, so our increment might put the struggle over the top.
- 3) We're Quakers. A “Quaker bank,” based in our region, is a major funder of mountaintop removal in Appalachia, despite the bank's branding as “a green bank.”
- 4) We're ready to fight. There's a historic Quaker connection to Appalachia and now the Appalachian people are being hurt and killed by Big Coal. They need that legacy of Quaker nonviolent direct action.
- 5) After seven months of campaigning, EQAT won a victory: PNC Bank promised to restrict its loans for mountaintop removal coal mining, and acknowledged that it did so under public pressure. EQAT worked with other important allies of the Appalachian people, especially Rainforest Action Network (RAN), and Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping.

In its first campaign Earth Quaker Action Team addresses class strategically: acting in solidarity with Appalachian working class families and targeting a bank rather than political officials. Middle class conditioning encourages loyalty to the super-rich and, therefore, a wish to reserve accountability to politicians, workers, and consumers—anyone but the most powerful. This strategy based on nonviolent direct action pushes middle class EQAT members out of their conflict-averse conditioning.

## EQAT and the practice of Friends' testimonies

In the course of the late-twentieth century Friends have developed some habits that are dysfunctional. EQAT is experimenting with acting outside those habits, which are probably products of class conditioning rather than leadings of the spirit. Some of these habits are:

- 1) **Consumerism**—going to hear a speaker on ecology and then telling oneself that one has done environmental action this week. For the most part, EQAT refuses invitations to give presentations, to avoid scratching Friends' consumerist itch.

- 2) **Scatterism**—believing that working on two issues is twice as good as working on one. Productive work on the edge requires focused energy and clear boundaries, so EQAT refuses requests from Friends to scatter our energy on multiple issues.
- 3) **Puritanism**—earning Quaker merit badges by personal life-style choices rather than asking how much difference one is making in the movement’s struggle for macro-level change. This is not to discount the value of personal integrity, but instead to be clear about what it is that affects, for example, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.
- 4) **Cleaning up others’ messes**—believing that taking junk out of a stream triggers the system change needed to save the planet. Quakers know that expecting little sister to clean up after big brother violates both, reinforcing gender- and age-based inequality. The class system is all about inequality, so it’s just fine with the super-rich if we clean up the messes that result from their activities.
- 5) **Vision aversion**—focusing on the micro level of change to the neglect of the big picture, despite the fact that “without a vision the people perish.” At its start EQAT studied and learned that projected energy needs can be met through sustainable sources.<sup>15</sup> We also learned from the Philadelphia Friends Center’s success in converting to carbon neutrality. We then told the regional president of PNC Bank our big picture; that we expect the bank to drop funding for mountain-top removal, then to stop funding coal, then to stop funding all fossil fuels, to impede the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s destructive path. All that is in the context of putting the bank’s money into sustainable energy sources, like wind and solar, and rebuilding the Appalachian economy.
- 6) **Privileging one’s comfort zone**—having a tacit agreement to rule out strategy that would make one personally uncomfortable. EQAT uses an outside consultant to guide our strategy sessions, supports its members with training, inspires itself with stories of others’ boldness, reminds itself of the historical Quaker legacy of nonviolent direct action, and experiences joy in the struggle.

But how can a small campaign make a big difference? Standing up for the right thing is not easy. Gandhi knew this; he found that his people would from time to time sink into discouragement and live their everyday lives trying to avoid the reality of British oppression. He therefore generated campaigns on a “smaller issue,” where a tangible victory could be won. After a few exemplary campaigns, a critical mass of Indians woke up to their own power, and joined in larger campaigns, huge enough to shake the largest empire the world had ever known. Gandhi knew that empowerment often needs confidence and example.

Dramatic events in 2011 Egypt followed Gandhi’s strategy. A despairing people woke up through the example of smaller Egyptian nonviolent campaigns in recent years and the successful nonviolent campaign in Tunisia. As some Egyptians acted boldly, more followed them and, to the enormous surprise of Middle East observers, they overthrew a vicious dictator!

Most U.S. environmentalists are like those Indians and Egyptians, discouraged and passive. They need smaller, direct action campaigns, zesty and dramatic, to wake them up to their own potential. Just as “the apathetic Negro,” so complained about by African American radicals in the early 1950s, generated in the American 1960s a thunderous wave of progressive change through

example and confidence; so, too, can today’s environmentalists wake up to our own power. I believe Friends are called to be part of that, bringing our vision of equality and at the same time freeing ourselves from some of our own spiritual chains. We can do that.

**George Lakey’s** 1973 book, *Strategy For A Living Revolution*, placed future social change movements in an ecological context. Here he draws from his fifty-year relationship with Norway and his interviews there with historians and economists. He is Visiting Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies at Swarthmore College and a founder of Earth Quaker Action Team. His most recent book is *Facilitating Group Learning* (2010). He thanks the Friends who helped him with this article.

#### Endnotes (websites accessed 12 September 2011)

- <sup>1</sup>*New York Times*, November 26, 2006. Buffett’s August 14, 2011 op-ed in the *New York Times*, urged, “Stop Coddling the Super-Rich.”
- <sup>2</sup>A network of over 700 business leaders and wealthy individuals in the top five per cent of income and/or wealth in the U.S. <faireconomy.org/projects/responsible\_wealth/about>.
- <sup>3</sup>See the Norway case in Swarthmore College’s Global Nonviolent Action Database <NVdatabase.swarthmore.edu> and four hundred other cases of nonviolent struggle, including stirring environmental campaigns.
- <sup>4</sup>Dozens of concrete economic tools Norway used to move toward equality are available for the asking <glakey1@swarthmore.edu>.
- <sup>5</sup>In 2008 Barack Obama said publicly that he knew that what the (Norwegians and) Swedes did to clean up their banks was the correct policy, but he said he would not try to do that in the U.S., due to “a different political culture,” i.e., the political control of the super-rich here. In 2011 we see the result.
- <sup>6</sup>Lakey, George, and Sharon Cantor, 2010. Earth Quaker Action Team. *Quaker Eco-Bulletin* 10:4.
- <sup>7</sup>For more about the gifts and limitations of class conditioning, watch the 2011 William Penn Lecture by George Lakey on the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting website <pym.org/video/george-lakey-powerful-beyond-measure-trusting-call-leadership>.
- <sup>8</sup>Leondar-Wright, Betsy, *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists*, New Society Publishers, 2005.
- <sup>9</sup>That was in 2005. In its August, 2011 declaration the AFL-CIO even came out against continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. “There is no way to fund what we must do as a nation without bringing our troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. The militarization of our foreign policy has proven to be a costly mistake.” A long-time labor official in Washington, D.C. estimated 80% opposition to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan among working families.
- <sup>10</sup>Bill Moyer, *Doing Democracy*, New Society Publishers, 2001.
- <sup>11</sup>Stout, Linda, *Bridging the Class Divide*, Beacon Press, 1996.
- <sup>12</sup>Elfrida Vipont, *George Fox and The Valiant Sixty*, 1976. A longer description of the story is in the 2004 Michener Lecture (SE Yearly Meeting of Friends) by George Lakey, “New Theory, Old Practice: Nonviolence and Quakers.”
- <sup>13</sup>Watch the film *Amazing Grace* (2007) or read Adam Hochschild’s book *Bury the Chains* (2005) to see the unfolding of the first modern social movement and its strategic shrewdness. Both the 17th century and 18th century Quaker campaigns are in the Global Nonviolent Action Database <NVdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.
- <sup>14</sup>Jacobson, Mark A. and Mark A. Delucchi A Path to Sustainable Energy by 2030. *Scientific American*, November 2009.
- <sup>15</sup>EQAT’s strategy of combining next steps with a big picture (revealed in our meeting with the PNC Bank officer) borrows from Mohandas Gandhi, Quaker Lawrence Scott, and other successful strategists.

QEB is taking a break for the first half of 2012. If you have any suggestions for future subjects or are led to write a QEB, do let us know <ekhelmuth@mindspring.com>.