The opening shot of the second ecological revolution

By Jeremy Brecher

It started as a typical conversation about the weather.

"Awfully hot," I said.

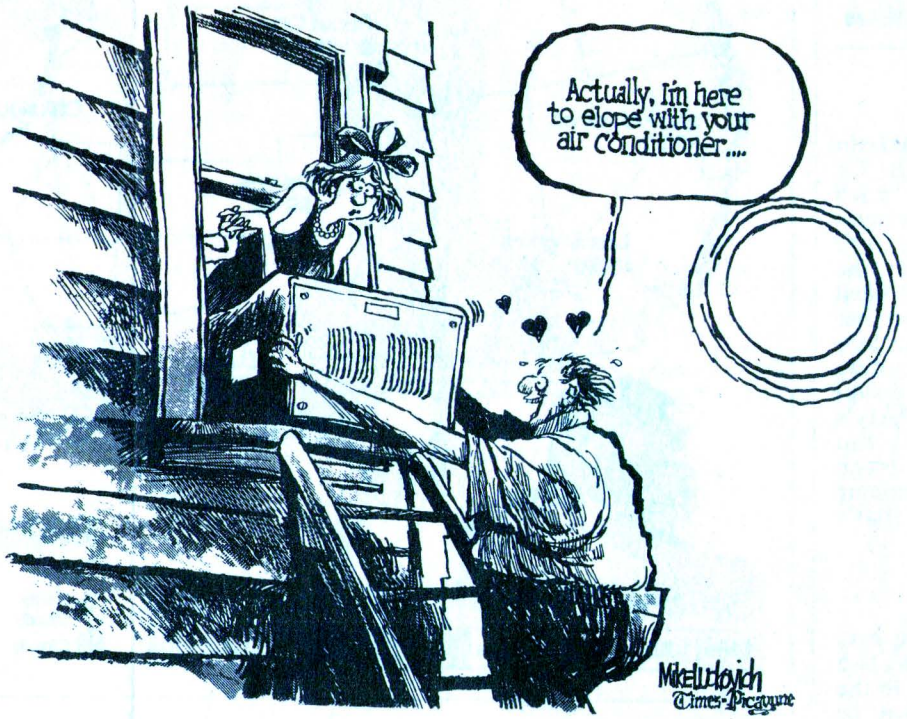
"I talk with old-timers who can't remember anything like it in 60, 70 years," my mailman responded. "It's probably this 'greenhouse effect.' If you ask me, it's a warning. All the poisons we're putting into the air and the water—if we don't get our act together, we're going to make the earth a place that people can't live on."

As a historian, I'm always on the lookout for subtle signs that indicate deep changes in social outlook. When that conversation shifted from local weather to the global biosphere, I felt I was witnessing the opening shot of the second ecological revolution.

The first ecological revolution was based on a popular recognition of the links between the different aspects of the micro-environment: that you cannot poison the bugs without also killing the birds. That realization spawned a popular movement involving millions of people which has now reached everywhere, even the Soviet bloc and the Third World. The result has been an array of environmental legislation in dozens of countries.

The second ecological revolution grows out of a recognition of the links of the macro-environment: that cutting rain forests in Costa Rica or burning coal in Gdansk may contribute to crop failures in Iowa and tree death in the Black Forest. This realization promises to bring about a second wave of evironmentalism whose prime characteristic will be its commitment to international solutions.

Recent environmental disasters are teaching us that the world's air and water cut across national boundaries as surely as DDT cuts across species boundaries. The radioactive cloud that rose above Chernobyl did not stop at the Soviet border but circled the globe. The acid rain that rises from U.S. smokestacks kills the forests of Canada. The cocktail of chemical poisons released by a warehouse fire in Switzerland flowed down the Rhine into Germany and Holland. The "greenhouse effect" resulting from burning too much fuel worldwide causes droughts in many parts of the world and the heat wave my mailman so clearly perceives as a warning.



That warning is already evident to many and is rapidly becoming evident to many more: Damage to the global environment threatens the basic conditions on which life depends and poses a clear and present danger that requires a global response.

Why aren't governments and politicians racing to meet this looming threat? The disturbing answer is that the measures we need to protect the global ecosphere will reduce the power of the world's most powerful institutions. National governments will have to accept international controls. Corporations will have to forego opportunities to make money at the expense of the environment. Military establishments will have to abandon programs that threaten the air and water. Beyond that, virtually everyone will have to adjust to substantial change—though not necessarily deterioration—in lifestyle.

The first ecological revolution began as a popular movement. It didn't wait for leadership from politicians. In fact, it imposed its own agenda on governments and economies, an agenda that ultimately limited the ability of politicians and corporate officials to pursue their interests at the expense of the environment.

The second ecological revolution will similarly have to impose its agenda on governments and businesses. It will have to say that preserving the conditions for human life is simply more important than increasing national power or private wealth. And it will have to act globally—with international petition drives, worldwide demonstrations and boycotts, and direct action campaigns against polluting countries and corporations.

A baby step toward international responsibility was taken last year when, in the face of mounting popular concern, more than 40 nations agreed to protect the ozone layer by limiting the use of chloroflurocarbons. The next logical step would be a binding international agreement to protect the atmosphere by limiting the production of the "greenhouse gases" that raise the earth's temperature.

The prime ministers of Canada and Norway recently called for such an agreement. But William A. Nitze, United States deputy assistant secretary of state for environment, health and natural resources, responded that it would be "premature at the current moment to contemplate an international agreement that sets targets for greenhouse gases."

Premature? Then when will it become timely—how many crop failures, heat waves and environmental disasters from now? And in the meantime, how does Mr. Nitze propose to protect us from the clear and present danger that degradation of the global environment poses to our security? Does he believe it is something that the free market or greater military strength can solve? How long does he think people will ignore something as close as the air they breathe and as insistent as the weather?

The words of my mailman bear a warning for political and business leaders: There is more to the second ecological revolution than hot air.

Jeremy Brecher is a historian and the author or co-author of six books, most recently "History from Below."