

“Refinery Town” Points the Way Forward to Protect Communities and Defend Rights

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Let’s just say there was a working class community—of various skin colors—which was dominated for a century by a giant corporation that ran the town with bought-and-paid-for politicians, and whose operations regularly poisoned the community, threatened the health and safety of its work force, and periodically blew up, sending thousands to the hospital. How could the citizens even begin to protect the health of their families and community, and exercise their democratic right to a local government that put the needs of the vast majority ahead of corporate profits?

The answer to that question can be found in *Refinery Town; Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of an American City* by labor activist and journalist Steve Early. The portrait of Richmond, California, a city of 110,000 people in the San Francisco Bay Area, and the decade-long political organizing and campaigns by the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA), contains many lessons that will be very useful to keep in mind as a new political regime takes power as well.

Richmond was a classic “company town” after Standard Oil of California (now Chevron) set up its oil refinery—then the third largest in the country—across the bay from San Francisco in 1905. For several decades, the oil company had a desk in City Hall to make it easy for the politicians funded by Chevron to be aware of the corporation’s opinions on city issues. Chevron’s oil tanker-sized political influence trailed in its wake conservative black community leaders (Richmond was a majority African-American city and now is roughly one-third black, one-third white and one-third Latino and Asian), as well as the unions representing firefighters and police, and the local building trade unions whose motto frequently has been “jobs at all costs.”

Starting at the dawn of the 21st century, this picture began to change with the rise of RPA, initiated by political and labor movement veterans from back East

who went on to make deep connections in black, white, Latino, and Asian neighborhoods in the city. Year-around activities, a lot of shoe leather, and patient face-to-face campaigning resulted in electing and re-electing a Green Party mayor (Gayle McLaughlin), electing numerous city councilors, defeating well-funded efforts to build a casino on coastal land, and hard-ball negotiations with Chevron for community benefits to accompany a major renovation of the 100-year-old refinery. In the November 2016 elections, the RPA succeeded in electing a majority in the seven-member City Council and passing the first rent-control law in California in more than two decades.

All of these developments were achieved over the opposition of Chevron—which outspent the RPA by as much as 20-to-1 in several election cycles in direct and indirect support of its favored candidates—and despite all the ups and downs of community organizations and the internal political/personality disputes that occur everywhere.

Not every campaign was won, of course, as “Big Soda” defeated a 2012 effort to tax sugary drinks that have contributed to the national obesity epidemic, especially in communities of color. However, lessons learned from that defeat helped the RPA win against Chevron’s multi-million-dollar electoral onslaught in 2014 and blunt the Trump/Republican sweep in 2016.

This highly readable book, complete with engaging portraits and entertaining vignettes about the real people who have participated in Richmond’s regeneration, contains key lessons that have actually worked against steep odds there, and could be applied elsewhere as well. Among these lessons are:

- **Unite Allies:** The RPA is open to Democrats, Greens, socialists, and others, who do not agree on each and every issue, but have been successful in nominating and electing candidates through a respectful discussion on what policies will actually advance the interests and rights of Richmond’s communities. The RPA has also made it a priority to win the support of workers and their unions at Richmond City Hall and other government agencies, and at the Richmond refinery.
- **Political independence:** The fundamental requirement of RPA candidates is that they do not accept any corporate money for their campaigns. This position has meant smaller campaign budgets than their opponents, but more victories as voters have recognized that the RPA candidates have the community’s welfare as their first and only priority.
- **Hard work and persistence:** The RPA is not just an election organization—it is active year-round and on the issues that affect working class communities everywhere—education, housing, health care, and recreation. The RPA participates in the city’s large number of commissions, boards, and committees, in addition to calling its own public meetings and “People’s Conventions.”
- **The ground game:** The RPA electoral successes have been built on the confidence it enjoys from the community based on its ongoing work, plus relentless

door-to-door, neighborhood-meeting campaigning to motivate the voters to actually make it to the polls. There is no substitute for this painstaking work that cannot be replaced by an “air war” (TV, radio, billboards), or simple election-year endorsements from organizations’ leaderships.

For health professionals and community activists concerned about occupational and environmental health, *Refinery Town* will be of special interest because it shows—optimistically—how much progress we have made in reframing the debate about workplace and environmental health, even if we have not achieved all that we seek.

In the early 1990s, Tony Mazzocchi, a leader of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers union representing refinery workers among others, called for a “Super Fund for Workers” to finance a “just transition” from fossil fuels to cleaner energy. He also pointed out that “pollution always starts in the workplace and then moves out into the community and the natural environment.” Twenty-five years ago, Mazzocchi’s was virtually a lone voice in the wilderness, especially in the labor movement which viewed environmental groups with deep suspicion.

In Richmond today, however, there is a strong labor-environmental coalition working together to support revisions to oil refinery worker health and safety laws to be enforced by Cal/OSHA. The Sierra Club and the Blue Green Alliance (itself an alliance of a dozen major environmental and labor groups) are working with the United Steelworkers (which represents refinery workers), the California Labor Federation, and the State Building & Construction Trades Council (which has been at loggerheads with the United Steelworkers in the past) to ensure that the strongest possible set of refinery rules is promulgated and enforced.

After working to bring labor and environmental groups together in the aftermath of the massive 2012 fire at Chevron’s Richmond refinery, Mike Wilson of the Blue Green Alliance noted that “in the last five years everyone has come to the same conclusion – the way to keep communities safe and healthy is to ensure that refinery workers are safe and healthy.”

This lesson is another from Richmond that can be applied elsewhere, and not only in communities with oil refineries.

Of course, not all of the country’s problems can be solved on a local level—no matter how honest and community-oriented local political leaders become. The expected reversal of worker and environmental protections, as well as withdrawal of federal funds for all kinds of community support under the Trump administration, will pose a big challenge in the next several years.

But the Richmond experience provides an example of how to unite allies, divide enemies, protect the vulnerable, and defend democratic rights. *Refinery Town* makes for useful reading for the years ahead.

The epilogue to the book contains the distilled wisdom of this experience and bears repeating:

Those responsible for Richmond's renaissance are not always on the same page politically. Personal spats and pet causes can be a source of distraction and, at times, embarrassment. But no process of change anywhere—much less in a place like Richmond—can occur without there being some community disagreements and divisions, personality conflicts, or racial and ethnic tensions . . . It takes time, organization, and systematic outreach around issues that affect people's daily lives. It also demands a great deal of emotional energy, plus—for those in elected positions—a very thick skin.

In all its local forms, civic engagement helps create personal connections and community solidarity. In successive electoral campaigns, these have become the great equalizer in Richmond . . . The grassroots mobilization capacity of the local left has been able to neutralize the usual advantages enjoyed by corporate adversaries with overall campaign budgets fifteen or thirty times larger. There is no single road map for social change in the United States, no one size fits all organizing strategy for countering and containing corporate influence . . . Counterintuitive as it may be, going local may be the most effective individual and collective response to economic and environmental threats that are dauntingly national and global in scope.

There are other cities and communities, of course, fighting for change and to protect the health, rights, and future of working class communities in the United States. All of these experiences, like those in *Refinery Town*, deserve to be publicized, studied, and emulated until the needs and interests of working people, the vast majority in America, become the actual purpose and goal of governments local, state, and national.

Author Note

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