

## **ORGANIZATIONS UNITED FOR THE ENVIRONMENT (OUE)**

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# **ORGANIZING AGAINST POLLUTERS: A MANUAL FOR GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS**

OUE is a grassroots environmental organization operating mostly in the Central Susquehanna Valley. It originated in 1975 when local citizens tried, but failed, to block a county landfill, and in the early 1990s OUE led a successful resistance to the siting of a huge hazardous waste incinerator just down the road from the landfill. Since the mid-1990s, OUE has worked with several citizen groups to organize resistance to the spread of polluters such as landfills, tire burning plants, radioactive waste dumps and, most recently animal factories and unregulated drilling for gas. (OUE's history and recent issues of its newsletter are on its web site).

Our experience, and that of the groups we have worked with, tells us in that resisting polluters there are some actions that tend to work better than others. That experience has also taught us that the rules for this kind of organizing are not written in stone, and there is no substitute for your imagination and grit in fighting back.

We are distributing this manual especially for anyone who wakes up one day to the news, for example, that a multinational meat processing company has contracted with a local farmer to raise 5,000 hogs across the road from their children's school. If this sort of thing happens to you – and in our area it is happening to more people every day – what in the world can you do? We hope that this manual will help you to answer that question. *The listed of actions suggested is not intended for everyone in every case, but things that people have tried that worked.*

## **1. Finding out the Bad News**

It can be a shock to the system, for example, to wake up on Thursday to discover that that the next Monday your township zoning board will be considering whether to allow a farmer to raise 100,000 chickens in the middle of your rural, residential area. If this happens, Rule One is this: Don't panic! Rule Two, paraphrasing the old Wobbly organizer, Joe Hill: "Don't moan, but get organized!" Rule Three: "Dig in, with tenacity!"

## **2. A Note on the Proper Attitude: Get Angry and Get to Work**

It is well known that corporate polluters scour the countryside looking for communities, especially ones close to major highways, where they think good hearted people live who won't oppose them. They also look for weak or nonexistent ordinances/zoning laws. Even if your township has a strong ordinance in place, supervisors are likely to claim that they don't apply for this or that reason, and that their hands are tied by the rules. In any case, to win these battles,

you to make the owners of the polluting company realize that they made a costly mistake in coming your way. In other words, you need to make a stink that's greater than the one they're trying to bring into your back yard. Begin by saying to the company owners, to the politicians, and to yourselves, "*I will not let you make me or my children sick! Or ruin my neighborhood!*"

### 3. Rousing the Neighborhood

**Suggestions for initial actions.** First, make up a simple, one-page flyer calling for an organizing meeting -- as soon as possible -- at some convenient location (your house, if necessary). Get others to help you circulate your flyer widely, including to shops, offices, banks, and other public locations. Emphasize in the flyer how your neighbors' interests are threatened by the operation. Write letters to editors of local newspapers that describe briefly the situation, announces hearings or planned meetings, and urges all to attend. **(At the end of the manual we've attached a flyer that a local group used in the early stages of its resistance.)**

### 4. Getting Organized

#### A. The First Meeting

The first meeting of your group will, possibly, be the most crucial one. Therefore, before you attend it, study the list below as a guide about what to do. The items on the list and their sequence are, of course, suggestive. But no part of the list is there without its having been recommended by someone with experience in grassroots organizing.

- Bring a yellow pad and some pens for sign-up sheets.
- Start by introducing yourself and others you've been working with. Circulate a sign-up sheet that asks for names, addresses (regular and email), and phone numbers. Be prepared to keep the meeting focused on distributing information and planning actions, rather than on venting anger.
- Ask for a volunteer to be temporary secretary to take minutes of the meeting.
- Tell people what you know and ask for comments from anyone who has relevant information about the permit you're resisting. Again, try to discourage digressions.
- Decide on a name for your organization at this first meeting.
- Get a volunteer to act as temporary treasurer. Ask if it's alright with the group for the treasurer to open a bank account and post office box in the group's name.
- Take up a collection for seed money and give it to the treasurer to deposit or to spend on start-up costs, such as for the post office box and for copying materials.
- Using sign-up sheets, ask for volunteers to be on working sub-committees, especially for: **research**, a newsletter, fund raising and public events (and see # 6 below for a description of what they might do).
- If you have enough people there, ask that everyone sign up for at least one working sub-committee and have each group meet briefly at the end of the meeting. Subcommittees should make update reports at every subsequent meeting.
- Urge the newsletter sub-committee to bring to the next meeting a draft of a 2-4 page newsletter with the latest news.
- The research sub-committee needs to look for three kinds of information. First are the

legal aspects of the matter, and a good idea is to have two or three volunteers request from the DEP and the township office a copy of the actual permit and related documents. They should study them carefully and write down pertinent questions about the permit application as they study it, so that they can brief the entire group.

- Second, the research group needs to look into the health and safety aspects of the project you are resisting. The internet is the best place to start such a search. For instance, Google, “Hog CAFOS and their problems,” and you will be on your way.
- Third, the research group needs to find out all it can about any local citizens and the corporation behind the polluting operation. Who are they and where are they located? What is their environmental record? This information will be invaluable as you go along.
- Ask if anyone knows of local experts -- especially scientists and doctors -- friendly to your side. Get volunteers to contact such experts to ask them to help with the research, make a brief presentation at the next meeting, or be witnesses at public hearings.
- Urge everyone who discusses the permit with a public official or the polluter to record the date, the person talked to, and a summary of the exchange. This paper trail will be crucial to your research, public hearings, and to a trial, if it comes to that.
- Plan the next meeting, no longer than a week away, because in the beginning it is crucial to meet often. Find a place – a church, someone’s house, a school room – where you can meet regularly. Settle on a meeting time/place and don’t change it unless you absolutely must. Send an email agenda to everyone prior to the next meeting.

#### B. Second Meeting

- Get the meeting started promptly, and send around another sign-up sheet. Have the temporary secretary read minutes from the last meeting, and have the temporary treasurer make a report.
- Pass out copies of the agenda that you’ve prepared and brought to the meeting.
- Discuss ways the group can get new members to the meetings.
- Elect permanent officers, such as president, vice-president, treasurer and secretary.
- Get reports from sub-committees, and recruit all new members to one of them.
- Listen to your experts, if any of them came to the meeting.
- Leave time for brief meetings of the sub-committee.
- Agree to the time and place of the next meeting.

### **5. Get a Lawyer**

You won’t likely prevail in these battles without the help of an attorney. Pennsylvania laws are stacked against regular citizens fighting against polluters, and you will face resistance in getting a fair hearing at every level of government. Lawyers can navigate these tricky waters better than the rest of us. Possibly, you’ll have a willing attorney in your group. But, this is not typically the case, and paying for lawyers and other experts will probably be your greatest expense.

### **6. The Main Thing: Permanent Working Subcommittees**

Once you get going, your sub-committees will become permanent, and what follows are some

ideas of how they might do their work.

Research. Until you get an attorney, members of this committee need to do the legal research themselves. This process is often made difficult by township supervisors and their solicitors who have already concluded that the laws prevent them, and you, from doing anything to stop the permit. Yet, despite this barrier, you and/or your attorney absolutely must familiarize the group with the relevant local and state laws, and it must be done quickly.

Concerning the polluter's threat to local health and safety, a central part of all meetings should be to share this information with the research group leading that discussion. All members of the group should make a few copies of really informative articles and distribute these to other members, the media, your attorney if you have one, and to public officials who will consider the permit. Always include the source, title, author, and date of the article.

Newsletter. As soon as possible, get volunteers to put out a short newsletter announcing your existence, aims, etc. Label it #1, with your group's name on it. The newsletter is crucial to make public your research, to announce meetings, fund raising events, and any other relevant public event. These days, decent looking newsletter can be done on computers. Be sure that it gets to local businesses, churches, and other potentially interested parties. To gain your readers' confidence, make the newsletter accurate, clear, and professional looking, then put it out regularly and promptly. Make up a "media list" from the internet where all media outlets have web pages with contact information. For each outlet, get the name and email of an individual, such as an editor, a reporter you know or have heard of, or someone else. Using the media list, get in the habit of emailing one page press releases about events and important meetings. Follow up with a phone call in a day or so to answer any questions. This process provides the kind of attention your group needs, and if you stay on it soon interested reporters you've educated about your issue will be looking for you.

Fund Raising. Simply put, the more money you raise the better your chances of winning. Pass the hat at all the meeting and get volunteers to canvass the relevant neighborhoods with an information sheet seeking members and money. After that, it's the old standbys: raffles (usually with the need of a county permit); auctions; bake sales; yard sales; soliciting from local businesses that might be affected; and whatever else comes to mind. Your treasurer should keep very careful records, and if it looks like the group is going to be around for a while, consider applying for tax exempt status. This sometimes takes months, but it's worth checking out.

Public Events. There are two kinds of public events that you need to plan for. The first are public meetings of local, county (including soil conservation districts), state, or federal officials related to the permit you are resisting. Most typically, these meetings will involve township supervisors or zoning boards, or the DEP. *Prior to these meetings, plan carefully how your group will participate.* The bigger the crowd you can get, the better, both as a political statement and because a big turn-out increases the group's confidence and energy. Most meetings allow a period for public comment but it is wise to have a spokesperson(s) from the group or other specific speakers (expert testimony) put on the agenda to assure that your point gets across.

The second kind of public event, aside from fund raisers, is a demonstration that you imagine, plan, and carry out yourselves. For example, you might want to demonstrate inside or outside

the offices of the DEP or the township supervisors; before or during public hearings; or outside the home of the president of the corporation that owns the 100,000 chickens headed for barns across the road. Whatever you do, there is no substitute for careful planning; really careful, as in military maneuvers. The first job of the demonstration sub-committee will be to make a list of *every single thing* that needs to be done in order to accomplish the goal of the event. It should then make up a list of these tasks, and who is supposed to do them, and make everyone a copy. This process will maximize accountability, something crucial to a successful event. Check with us at OUE because we have some experience with planning demonstrations.

## **7. Settling in for the Long Haul: Only a Few of You Will Do Most of the Tasks So Get Over it and Get to Work**

These environmental fights finally tire out everyone involved, and there are two aspects of this dragged-out process worth remembering. First, you will feel badly short of time on that day you discover that last week your township supervisors, without adequate notification, approved a permit to locate two huge gas storage tanks across from your kids' school. However, once you begin to contest rulings and make yourself a political presence, time can actually become your friend. As an example, if Hatfield meat contracts with a local farmer to build a hog factory, that farmer will have to borrow hundreds of thousands of dollars, and pay interest on it, to build the barns and other necessary equipment. This means that delays in the review process, especially by appealing every ruling that goes against the group, can end up being the key to your success.

Second, time can be your enemy if people start getting burned out. In grassroots groups some people will do the bulk of the work, and put up the bulk of the necessary money. Many others, however, will sit and watch it all happen. If you are one of the core workers, the best way to minimize the resentment you will surely feel is to be as imaginative as possible in figuring ways to get others to help out. Then, if all else fails, as it often does, do it yourself. The experience of grassroots organizing reveals again and again how much can be accomplished by just a few people if they (1) decide that they are not going to lose and (2) work like hell *without resentment* toward those who won't, can't, or don't know how to do anything to help.

## **8. Contacts**

Seek advice from anyone you think might help, and the list below is a place to start.

**Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund.** (<http://www.celdf.org>). CELDF works to help citizens get their townships to write zoning ordinances that regulate the operations of all corporations within their borders. CELDF also holds regular sessions of its "Democracy School" which, among other things, teach people ways to take back power in their own back yards.

**Environmental Attorneys.** These are hard to come by. Start working immediately on trying to find one in your area.

**Global Resource Action Center for the Environment** (<http://www.gracelinks.org>). GRACE is an invaluable source for research on animal factories, and its director and staff are accessible by phone and email for specific questions and, possibly, as expert witnesses. It also has links to all the other principal sources of information.

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The following handout was used in 2002 by a group that, in alliance with OUE, successfully resisted a hog factory. Their actions led the DEP to deny a permit for the operation.

September, 2002

**TO THE RESIDENCES OF DERRY, ANTHONY AND  
LIMESTONE TOWNSHIPS: PLEASE ATTEND THE DERRY  
TOWNSHIP SUPERVISORS MEETING ON SEPTEMBER 10<sup>TH</sup> AT 7:00 P.M.  
TO OPPOSE CORPORATE HOG FARMS IN YOUR BACKYARD.**

A grass roots organization, "Montour Citizens For A Clean Environment" (MCCE), has been organized to protect the health, safety and the welfare of this beautiful area. MCCE has been formed to prevent corporate hog factories from setting up shop in our backyard with no concern to your health, the environment and your property values. As a farming community we understand proper stewardship of this area's unique valley and the need to maintain it for future generations. We do not need the empty promises of corrupt corporations who have no concern for you. (i.e. Wenger Feeds and its subsidiaries)

The ill effect of corporate hog farms keeps accumulating as their history unfolds. Reviewing what has taken place in North Carolina as one example in the past years easily identifies the history of corporate hog farms. The following is a list of what you will expect if these corporate hog farms get a foothold in your back yard.

1. **Basic Rights**, Only a minority of people are for these farms, thus when they come into being they take away your right to clean air and water. Not only do you have to contend with foul air chances are great that you will have to filter your drinking water and/or buy bottled water. The contract farmer or the corporation will not financially assist you. The 4200 hog farm proposed for Deny Township will use in excess of 34,000 gallons of water a day. In regards to manure, this 4200 hog farm will generate more than 2 million gallons of antibiotic and steroid ridden slurry to be spread in your neighborhood.
2. **Outside owners**. Factory hog farms are owned by absentee landlords who gather the profits without experiencing any of the costs associated with the environmental effects, and they evade any liabilities in years to follow.
3. **Property values**. Within a 2 mile radius of any factory hog farm property values historically are reduced considerably, it has been reported as much as 30 to 40%.
4. **Fouls the air**. The horrendous odor of these concentrated hog farms will carry for miles. The smell comes from the lagoons and the spread of the manure in high concentrations on the fields. The smell of over 2 million gallons of manure will be spread in your neighborhood. It makes life unbearable.
5. **Water Contamination**. Leaking lagoons will contaminate water supplies and streams. Leaking lagoons may not happen for five to ten years but it will happen. The process of spreading 2 million gallons of manure will certainly reach the local waterways which is very detrimental to the aquatic life and your water resources. And, again the contract farmer and the corporation will not share the expense to rectify your problem.
6. **Township Revenue**. Historically very little revenue is generated for the township that the farm is built in. The majority of corporate hog farms are supplied their feed from outside mills usually owned or partially owned by the corporation who owns the farm contract. Little revenue and new employment opportunities are generated for the township.

The problems of corporate hog farms are more complicated than simply described above. If you wish to learn more or would like to support the MCCE, we meet every Wednesday night and we would be happy to have you join us.

**We need volunteers and donations.**