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Labor Day 2017: Good Jobs and Zero Waste Now!

by Martin J. Bennett

Sonoma County residents have an historic opportunity to address two of America's most critical 21st century issues: one is soaring economic inequality and the explosion of low-wage jobs paying less than \$15 an hour; the other is global warming and the imperative to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions by ending our reliance on fossil fuel. California communities have addressed both crises with "good jobs and zero waste" policies.

Two May 2017 events spotlight this opportunity for Sonoma County. First, after a five-month organizing drive for waste management workers, 400 drivers and recycling and clerical workers employed by the Ratto Group--North Bay's largest waste management company--voted overwhelmingly to join Teamsters 665. North Bay Jobs with Justice supported the drive, working closely with the Teamsters to build a broad coalition of labor, environmental, and community organizations.

Second, more than 100 business, environmental and labor organization representatives attended the first Zero Waste Symposium in the County, organized by Sustainable North Bay. Participants discussed how wastes could be recycled, reused, and composted, to divert 90 percent or more from landfills and incinerators.

Ratto and the Crisis of Low-Wage Employment

Dominating Sonoma County's waste management industry since the late 1990s, and providing waste hauling and recycling services for

County unincorporated areas and every city except Sonoma, the Ratto Group (a North Bay Corporation subsidiary) became the North Bay's 'Wal-Mart of garbage.'

Ratto consistently underbid competitors to provide the lowest rates for cities and the County, while generously contributing to local elected officials' campaigns.

However, 'always lower prices' invariably means paying poverty wages and providing no benefits. Ratto Group drivers averaged \$16 an hour and recycling workers received barely more than the state minimum wage of \$10.50 an hour. Ratto workers did receive health insurance, but no retirement benefits--critical for a physically challenging occupation like waste management. Along with big box giants, Wal-Mart and McDonald's, and hotel chains like Hyatt, the Ratto Group drives the County's low-wage employment crisis.

According to 2015 U.S. Census data, one-third of County residents belonged to working-poor families--earning less than \$48,500 yearly (for a family of four with at least one member reporting income).

The California Employment Development Department estimates that 54 percent of newly created jobs in Sonoma County between 2014-2024 will pay less than a livable wage of \$22/hr.--the minimum that two parents, each working a full-time job, must earn for basic necessities and support for two children without relying on public programs, such as Medi-Cal and Food Stamps.

What a Santa Rosa Audit of the Ratto Group Revealed

The Ratto cost-cutting business model has undermined the quality of services provided. In June 2016 a City of Santa Rosa consultant audited the waste management contract and slammed the Ratto Group for many violations of its franchise agreement.

The audit discovered that Ratto was operating a rat-infested, poorly maintained and hazardous recycling facility on Standish Road in Santa Rosa without the required County Health Department permits.

The consultant also found the Ratto Group out of compliance for failing to rebuild its fleet of polluting and unsafe garbage trucks; not meeting minimal 45-percent rates of waste diversion from landfill and incinerators; and for providing inadequate customer service.

In 2015 the County Health Department began assessing daily fines against Ratto (that totaled nearly \$400,000 by June 2016) for operating a substandard recycling facility. The City of Santa Rosa threatened further fines totaling \$17 million dollars.

In 2016 the city refused to extend the Ratto Group contract for another five years and reopened competitive bidding for the waste management contract.

Recology and Sustainable Waste Management

In January 2017, the waste management firm Recology, which serves all of San Francisco and 126 California, Oregon, and Washington communities, announced that it would purchase Ratto. The sale was finalized in early August, and Recology signed a binding agreement with the Teamsters mandating that the company will retain Ratto employees and their union.

Recology has a long track record of maintaining the highest labor, environmental, and customer service standards. Recology has operated in San Francisco as a unionized wall-to-wall company since the 1930s, providing excellent family-supporting wages and comprehensive benefits, including health and dental care, sick days, paid vacation, and retirement.

In addition, Recology workers can purchase tax exempt shares in the company. Employees own 100 percent of company stock, and can cash out when they leave--or receive additional retirement income based upon their stock's value. The company also provides extensive education and training programs for workers seeking better-paying and more skilled positions within the company.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that waste management and

recycling is one of the nation's most dangerous industries, with the fifth highest worker fatality and injury rate in 2015. Recology has maintained a strong safety record through: ongoing health and safety trainings for all employees; implementing an 'illness and injury prevention program,' audited and updated annually; and ensuring that all employees have state-of-the-art protective gear.

Recology workers are on the front line for achieving zero waste. With a voice at work through their union, access to ongoing training and education, a controlled line speed, and a safe workplace, they are equipped to play a key role in maximizing recycling rates and ensuring a high-quality, clean waste stream.

According to the Los Angeles Alliance for A New Economy's 2015 report, "Cleaning Up Waste Management and Securing the Benefits: A Blue Print for Cities," Recology has: 1) partnered with San Francisco to attain an 80-percent diversion rate in 2013 – the highest of any North American city; 2) maintained one of the most advanced and automated recycling facilities in the world at Pier 96; 3) collaborated with the City to develop an extensive door-to-door multilingual consumer education program for instructing customers how to recycle their trash most efficiently and effectively.

Recology's record in San Francisco and elsewhere demonstrates how to create good jobs across the waste stream, and achieve the highest diversion rates in a cost-effective manner.

A Zero Waste Policy for Sonoma County?

Sonoma County Environmentalists have long urged local government to adopt zero waste programs similar to other California cities and counties. Zero waste is a goal and a vision for reducing what we put in landfills and incinerators to zero. Much that we now throw away can be safely and economically recovered, recycled, reused, or composted to yield biogas.

Getting to zero will require mandatory recycling and composting for all residents and businesses, and implementation of a three-bin

customer system for separating recyclables (glass bottles, paper/cardboard, aluminum cans, hard plastics) from organic waste (food scraps and yard trimmings), and trash (plastic bags, broken glass, pet litter) to maximize recycling and a clean waste stream. Recycling of construction waste and debris also must be mandatory. Implementing a highly efficient three-bin system won't occur overnight; it requires years of consumer education.

Composting is essential for reaching zero waste. Compostable food wastes are as much as 35 percent of trash sent to landfills, which produce methane, accounting for 17 percent of all greenhouse emissions according to the EPA. Sustainable agriculture requires composting to add precious organic nutrients back to the soil and to sequester carbon in healthy soils.

Due to a lawsuit settlement and environmental concerns, Sonoma Compost, the County's only large compost producer, ceased operations at the County landfill in 2015. Recology's six compost facilities in California manufacture a billion pounds of compost each year and the company has the capacity and resources to fill the void from the closure of Sonoma Compost.

Zero Waste and the Circular Economy

Getting to zero requires much more than the three-bin collection system. The May Zero Waste Symposium discussed the need for fundamental change in product manufacturing and design, in order to develop a 'closed loop clean recycling economy.' State and local government can lead the way by requiring higher recycling content in public-sector procurement--and by providing economic incentives for both business investment and innovation in a clean recycling economy, and for manufacturing new products made with locally recycled materials. A 2011 Tellus Institute report, "More Jobs Less Pollution," stated that increasing U.S. recycling 40 percent by 2030 could create 1.5 million good recycling-reliant manufacturing and reuse jobs, while cutting greenhouse gas emissions in half.

AB 341, approved by California's legislature in 2014, mandates a 75-percent waste-diversion rate from landfills by 2020. Cal Recycle, charged with overseeing the State's waste management programs, identifies 5 counties and 21 cities that have implemented zero waste policies exceeding the mandate. For example, a 2014 Los Angeles zero waste policy requires a 90 percent diversion rate by 2025.

The unionization of Sonoma County's waste management industry, this year's first Zero Waste Symposium, and now the arrival of Recology, indicate a turning point for the local zero waste movement.

This is the moment for a broad coalition of labor, environmental, business, and community organizations to develop a comprehensive policy on good jobs and zero waste for every city and the County-- and to engage elected officials and County residents in an informed dialogue about policy that can improve job quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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