

# Putting “Progress” Back In Progressive

The route to social justice, fair food and a sustainable environment

**By Jim Hightower**

*Bridge to an Organic Future*  
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*Jim Hightower is a national radio commentator, writer, public speaker, and author, Swim Against The Current: Even A Dead Fish Can Go With The Flow. The following article is transcribed from Jim Hightower’s keynote talk at Bridge to an Organic Future, the 27th National Pesticide Forum. The conference was sponsored by Beyond Pesticides, Toxic Free North Carolina and numerous local, state and regional organizations. To watch video footage of this talk, as well as other Forum presentations from 2006 to the present, visit [www.beyondpesticides.org/forum/video](http://www.beyondpesticides.org/forum/video).*

**T**hank you for allowing a scruffy Texas populist to come here and be a part of your deliberations. It just makes me happier than a mosquito at a nudist colony to be looking out at all of you great Beyond Pesticides’ dreamers, schemers, you innovators and educators, you earth healers and bridge builders, corporate butt kickers, and grassroots agitators; agitators for America’s proud progressive values of economic fairness, social justice, and equal opportunity for all people. That is the essence of what America is all about, what we stand for in the world. What makes America at all important are those values of fairness, justice and opportunity for everybody.

I want to thank the Unitarians for letting us transform this sanctuary into the high church of revelation and redemption here tonight. And I want to thank Beyond Pesticides and Toxic Free NC for gathering us together here to celebrate our achievements which have not been small, including that little election we had last November; most importantly for gathering us together in this really crucial time to strategize, organize, and mobilize; for our next steps in this ongoing battle to take America back from the greed-heads and boneheads; and, to move America forward into a new era of good food and good stewardship, common sense and the common good.

## **Opportunity for change**

What we have won in 2008 is not merely the White House. It is the opportunity for change. That is what we achieved, last year. Not the change itself, but the chance to make change. I know that you know that this is not easily done. The powers-that-be on Wall Street and in Washington is kind of redundant these days, isn’t it? They get to think that they are the top dogs and we are a bunch of fire hydrants out here in the countryside. That is why I am so pleased to come over here to the Triangle area to be with those of you who are genuine change agents, those of you who have been on the front lines of democracy all these years, challenging the greed of tinkle-down-economics that we have been practicing, defying the corporate order and changing the conventional wisdom.

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Some cynics say it’s not even worth the effort, don’t even try; you cannot empower regular people to take charge. But as a friend of mine who has been a pioneer in the organic movement said, “Hightower, those who say that it can’t be done should not interrupt those who are

doing it.” And that would be you. And I thank you for that. It is not easy to do what you do. I know. Wherever you are, whether you’re fighting as this great contingent of farmworkers is doing, or tobacco, cucumbers or sweet potatoes workers, you’re taking them on, fighting local government, state government, national government over issues of pesticides. It’s not easy. Sometimes you get to feeling like that guy that B. B. King sings about, “Nobody likes you but your mama, and she might be jiving you too.” Did you ever get to feeling like that?

Not easy, but it is essential if America is ever to achieve those ideals that we put out to the world of fairness and justice and opportunity. It is essential that good folks like you stand up. So I’ve come here chiefly to applaud you for the gumption and gutsiness that you show day in and day out.

## **Unsustainable farm and food policy**

Woodrow Wilson, when he first came to Washington, said, “If you want to make enemies try to change something.” All you’re trying to change is 60 odd years of ignorance and arrogance and avarice that has created a national pesticide addiction in America that is destructive, costly, unnecessary and demonstrably insane. Look at the insanity of our food and farm policy. These policies have brought us an industrialized, conglomeratized, chemicalized, globalized, subsidized agriculture system that is unsustainable. You don’t need an IQ higher than room temperature really to figure it out. To see that what the powers that be are doing might work for Dow Chemical and Monsanto. It might work for Tyson’s Food and Wal-Mart. But, it is not working for us. For the majority of the American people it is a policy that runs roughshod over family farmers, runs roughshod over farmworkers, over our soil and our water, over consumers, over food itself; policy that runs roughshod over our values of social justice and egalitarianism.

What happened to us. How did this come about? What happened is this – politics. We Americans stood by, unbeknownst to us, as our food and farm policies, our food and farm politics, were hijacked by the money-powers with their lobbyists and their lawyers being in charge of food and farm policy! These lawyers and lobbyists, these are people who could not run a watermelon stand if we gave them the melons and we had the highway patrol flag down the customers for them. But nonetheless, they are in charge of our food policy. The operating principal of these profiteers seems to be: if brute force isn’t working, it’s probably because you are not using enough of it. So we got a billion pounds of pesticides being poured on our crops every year. A billion pounds each year!

We have farm labor wages that mock the work ethic. That’s the big centerpiece of what workers are supposed to aspire to. The work ethic in America – well, if the work ethic was actually rewarded, Wall Street bankers would be toiling for pennies and farmworkers would be getting retention bonuses and golden parachutes. These are policies that centralized agricultural production so that the typical item in our supermarkets travels 1,500 miles to get there.

Food itself is tortured, literally tortured. Genetic manipulation: the tampering with the very DNA of the world’s food supply

without human health or environmental consequences being tested. Cows are vegetarians, yet we are forcing them to become carnivores or even cannibals. We put animals, from chickens to pigs, into concentration camps called CAFOs, confined animal feeding operations, and factory farms. We inject animals with antibiotics and sex hormones, not because we want them to be sexy or we want them to be healthy, but because they want them to grow faster. We zap our food with radiation to try to cover up the mess they made and then we zing it with additives, flavorings, preservatives, sugars and trans fats. They’re turning food, nature’s own gloriously diverse and delicious cornucopia, into a widget - an assembly line corporate profit center that loses all connection to the good earth and our well-being.

## **“Keep your mouth open”**

This is where you come in. This is why your efforts are so important to the grassroots level all across our country. You know they say, “The first job of a citizen is to keep your mouth open.” Y’all are pretty good at that. But, it always helps if that mouth is attached to a brain. And that is what you do. Your grassroots outreach provides the information, the training, the connections, the visions to link the brain power to the mouth power which connects then to the political power.

## **Together we can do it ourselves**

I think of groups like Beyond Pesticides in terms of something that Susan DeMarco, my co-conspirator, and I wrote about in this book about a hardware store right near our home in south Austin, Texas. It’s a hardware store called Harrell’s Hardware. It’s about half the size of this room right here. It’s a great place. You don’t have to buy the whole package of nails. They’ll sell you one nail. “I need a nail.” “Here.”

They’ll work with you. “What are you trying to do?” “Well, I’m going to build a bookshelf.” “Well, let’s pencil it out here and see what you need.”

They’ll loan you a tool. And you can take a tool home and bring it back. And Harrell’s Hardware slogan is: “Together we can do it yourself.” Isn’t that perfect? That has to be our slogan doesn’t it? We can’t do it ourselves, but together we can - do it ourselves.



## The Election of Obama

That brings us to where we are. We have to ask the question. Barack Obama is elected, what now? We won didn't we? Well, not yet. We did win. Obama's election is a thrill. First of all, it means that George W. and his buddy buckshot Cheney are gone, gone, solid gone. It took a while but the people of America did rise up and say not only does the emperor have no clothes but he is buck-naked and butt-ugly. They voted those suckers out of there. Second of all, we got ourselves a Democrat, a progressive-minded Democrat, an African-American, progressive-minded Democrat. Let us see the show of hands of how many saw that was possible two years ago. Achievement is coming along. We deserve to wallow in the progress, but not to get stuck in it. Some change has already come our way. And that's important. You know they say that the worst job in the circus is cleaning up after the elephants.

We are making some progress. Hilda Solis is the new Secretary of Labor and she is dynamite. She is going to do some good. We have some hope with Lisa Jackson. "The EPA is back on the job," she says. We are going to push her to that. We have the first family creating an organic garden on the White House grounds and an organic kitchen.

### Grassroots agitation more important now

But a big profound change has also happened and we got to acknowledge that it does not get a lot of attention, but it is a very important to everything that we are trying to do. And that is that the debate has shifted. The debate is on our terms now, not on their terms. That changes everything. That means that we can be on the offensive. Now having said all that, we can't go all goosey about Obama's election and the big change. Our grassroots agitation and our organizational aggressiveness is more essential now than ever before. We can't just crank back in the lazy boy and say, oh well, Barack's got it covered now. Do some 12 ounce elbow bends and watch him work. Well, that's not the way it's going to work. Let's be honest. Barack Obama is only going to be as good as we make him be. We have to be the force.

I got to tell you I had mixed emotions January 20th. I was there in front of my TV in Austin, Texas watching that crowd that filled back to the Capitol, to the Washington Monument and back to the Lincoln Memorial and back on across. A couple of million people were out there. Now I got the goose bumps and felt the heart palpitations and all that. But I had mixed emotions watching him



Jim Hightower told Forum participants that the election of President Obama is just the beginning and that he believes the role of the grassroots pressure is more important than ever.

taking the oath of office. You know they say, "A mixed emotion is when you see your 16-year old daughter come home from the prom with a Gideon bible under her arm."

### Facing ignorance, arrogance and avarice

Well, on the one hand we got a guy here with good progressive instincts, good progressive roots. We got a guy with a commitment to change and a mandate for change. We got a guy with strong public support. But, on the other hand, we got a guy who is face-to-face with the forces of ignorance and arrogance and avarice in Washington, DC.

Let me just name three of those forces of ignorance, arrogance and avarice. First, consider this sobering statistic: 13,000. That's how many corporate lobbyists are in Washington, DC tonight and every day of the week – 13,000 corporate

lobbyists. They are already on the prowl. You can look at the Wall Street bailout, as nauseating as it is. Wall Street bankers caused a financial collapse that is crushing America with their laissez-faire-y-land ideology. We now have seven states in America that have job unemployment above 10 percent, not just Michigan, but California, North Carolina and Oregon -previous boom states with 10 percent plus unemployment. Millions of people have lost their homes. Whole industries are being wiped out - General Motors, Chrysler. A bailout that's now tallied not the \$700 billion you have heard about, but \$9.9 trillion so far has been committed by the Federal Reserve and the Treasury to back up loans and guarantees, as well as the direct subsidies and bailout. So who is getting the money? It's not the people who are losing their jobs. It's not the folks losing their homes. It's not anybody really in the

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Jim Hightower told the crowd that every day, Washington, DC is flooded with 13,000 corporate lobbyists.

countryside. It's the very Wall Street bankers, the creeps and the crooks and the incompetents who knocked us down, who crashed the economy. They looked at that pile of bailout money, sent their lobbyists to Washington and the lobbyists jumped on that money like a gator on a poodle. I mean it was instantaneous. There are 3,000 lobbyists out of those 13,000 that work for Wall Street.

Second reality. Obama is faced with that cynical gaggle of rabidly reactionary Rush Limbaugh Republicans in Congress who are determined to make him fail. That's their goal. When Obama put forth his economic recovery plan just a few weeks ago, these Republicans got on their hind legs and squawked like a rooster choking on a peach pit. "Too costly," they said. "Too much waste," they screeched, "Too much, too much." They demanded concessions and cuts, which Obama gave them and then en masse they voted against the very bill they forced to come their way. This is why Lily Tomlin said, "No matter how cynical you get, it is impossible to keep up."

Third, don't forget my party. I come to you as a Democrat, elected on a Democratic ticket a few times down in Texas, much to the amusement of the people there. But I look up at Washington and I see that we still have too many weak-kneed, don't-rock-the-boat, milk-toast corporate Democrats up there. And when it comes to standing up for working people, when it comes to standing up for poor people, when it comes to standing up for what's right, they get weaker than Canadian hot sauce. Last year we saw them in action. Remember when Bush got caught spying illegally on the American people. Not on a few of us, millions of us; just scooping up our emails, our phone calls, etc. It was illegal. It was unconstitutional. So what did the Democratic Congress do? They voted to legalize his illegality and made it retroactive. I got an email from a guy who said he hoped Bush would get caught smoking pot so then Congress would legalize marijuana.

This is why we have got to step up. Grassroots progressives: Feldman, Fawn and Allen, you and you and you and me. We have to be the outside counterforce to the inside reactionaries who will try to stop and stall any change that might be possible. Otherwise, last Fall's victories will be nothing but tarnished trophies. We must back up Obama when he is right and buck up Obama when he is wrong.

### **"I am not the change, you are"**

I endorsed Obama in the Texas primaries back last March. We vote twice in Texas. We had both a primary and a caucus - very strange. We were like goats on AstroTurf. We didn't know what we were doing wandering around out here. But, when I endorsed him, I said that the significant thing to me about the Obama phenomenon was not Obama, but the phenomenon and the

fact that there were millions of people, particularly young people, who were coming out of nowhere and organizing that campaign. He didn't organize it. They organized it. They put it together themselves, raised their own money, did their own block walking, their own organizing. It was a tremendous exercise in political democracy. And Obama acknowledged it. He said, "I am not the change, you are." And that's the truth of it. And he reiterated that just before he took the oath of office. He said, "I would not have won without our ability to organize ordinary people. We want that to continue. It is important for holding me accountable. I don't want them to wait around waiting for me to do something. I want them to be pushing their agendas."

He asked for it. That's us. We have to do that. We have to do that stronger than we are now even thinking about doing that. We got to be in his face and in his whole administration's face. This is our administration. It doesn't belong to the Republicans. It doesn't belong to the corporate interests. It belongs to us. And we have to demand that they do what they were elected to do. This is why

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**"No matter how cynical you get, it is impossible to keep up."**

**- Lily Tomlin**

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people voted for him. People wanted change. They didn't mean just change as a word. They wanted change in policies.

I think we are in a 1933's kind of moment, when Franklin Roosevelt came into office. You know Roosevelt didn't campaign on the New Deal. There was no New Deal. He used the phrase but there was no New Deal. There was nothing to it. Farmers were holding all across the country penny auctions. Penny auctions are when the bankers came in to try and take their farms and the family had to stand there and they would auction off their farm. But the farm neighbors would gather around and one farmer would say, "I offer a penny," and no other farmer would offer two pennies. So they had to shut the auction down. They saved the farms. That's radicalism. That's taking charge. It happened because labor in Flint, Michigan and all across the country were in brutal battles with the bosses and the goons, bleeding and dying to fight for the right to organize and stand up for ordinary people, for some semblance of a middle class possibility. It happened because there were people like Maury Maverick, the mayor down in San Antonio, because of Huey Long in Louisiana, because of Harry Hopkins up in New York, because there were people who were stronger than Franklin Roosevelt, saying here's a way we need to go. It happened because Eleanor Roosevelt was in the White House. It happened because ordinary people stood up at the Bonus March. Go right on down the line. Look at the history. Read Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*. Get your history in order. This is what happened.

### **It's up to us**

No progress is made except that for ordinary people take charge and demand, insist, go to the streets, bleed and die and make it possible for it to happen. That's what was happening. That is what created the New Deal. And when Sydney Hillman and a group of labor leaders went in when Roosevelt took office in 1933 and sat with him and said you got to do something about poverty in America, people have been wiped out. And Roosevelt interrupted and said, "I agree with you. I want to do it. Now make me do it. Make me do it." That's us.

We have to be the powers. Obama is not going to do it unless we make him do it. He says he wants to. We have to be the one's to make him do it.

My message to you, and I'm sure you are

wondering what it is, is this: *It is up to us*. Ultimately, democracy, progress, change always comes down to just folks, just folks. The powers-that-be never do it for us. They are the ones that are doing it to us. They're never going to do it for us.

We have to be the ones. Now we have a special responsibility and that is what I see in the materials here, the message of your gathering here. "Change is possible," Feldman wrote. This is our opportunity to create the bridge to an organic future. It doesn't create the bridge. It's our opportunity to do it. And having the opportunity, we have a special responsibility. We have not had the possibility before. Under George W. we had no possibility. We could protest, we could advocate, we could go have meetings, but there was no possibility that they would do anything we wanted them to do. And I'll be honest, even under Bill Clinton there was very little possibility that they were going to do what we wanted to be done. We know, though, we have the opportunity to make this progress and to build this bridge that you are talking about.

These opportunities don't come along very often. We have an historic responsibility to stand up and push back. One thing we must do is to reach out to each other and build those coalitions. Not only with the usual suspects, but also to the allies we might not even know we have. You know the powers-that-be are always trying to divide us. They say, "Oh, well, labor they can't get along with farmers. Farmers can't get along with environmentalists and environmentalist can't get along with poor people." Well, bovine excrement!

As Jesse Jackson said so well, "We might not have come over on the same boat, but we are in the same boat now."

### **New alliances**

That's a powerful political reality. And we need to tie into that.

A couple of examples: I know y'all are involved in one of these and that's the blue-green alliance, labor with environmentalists. Developing a whole new economic possibility, independence from foreign oil, indeed independence from any oil, based on green jobs that hold so much more potential in terms of numbers of jobs and in terms of the pay of those jobs. Investing in retrofitting all our buildings for conservation purposes based on solar and wind power and all



According to Jim, the U.S. is in a 1933's kind of moment.



In his talk, Mr. Hightower discussed the value of new alliances, for example, environmental organizations partnering with conservative Christians who are interested in "Creation Care."

the other alternative energy possibilities. Based on taking those machinists that Boeing Aircraft said they don't need because they are going to go to China to make their airplanes. Well, let's put them to work and build a high-speed train between all of our population corridors. We have a lot of opportunities out there. And the blue-green alliance has come together, led by the Sierra Club, the largest membership environmental organization, and the Steel Workers, the largest industrial union in our country, and now is growing by leaps and bounds. Barack Obama has essentially embraced it, not as fully in the budget as needs to be done, but nonetheless embraced the concept. And, a guy named Van Jones, who is terrific, who headed an organization called Green for All, is now in the White House - another big change taking place. That is one example.

### **Religiosity**

Another example that not a lot of people think about, something that Susan and I wrote about in the book *Swim Against the Current: Even a dead fish can go with the flow* at some length, is the evangelical environmental movement. Most progressives know nothing about this. But there is a big phenomenon, a big change is taking place among evangelicals. They have decided that they are not going to be typecast by the Karl Roves of the Republican Party. In fact, they said our party has been hijacked by the Republican Party, that they have a broader concern than just gay rights, which they have a concern about, a broader concern than just abortion, they have a concern about that, a broader concern than prayer in the schools - all those sorts of issues. But they have a deep concern about poverty, a deep concern about race, a deep concern about human rights, and a deep concern about global warming. So they have issued this evangelical call to action that says the gospel is the whole of it; not a piece of it, but

the whole of it. They are taking on this issue of global warming, particularly among the 50 and younger ministers and congregations.

By the way, I should add that the evangelical movement of James Dobson, of Pat Robertson, of Jerry Falwell, and this whole crowd has demonized environmentalists. You know it's just the evil of all. Out in places like Idaho they have been able to use people's jobs against environmentalists. So you're just trying to take our jobs away, that's all there is. So there is hatred about environmentalism.

We wrote about, for example, out in Idaho a fellow named Tri Robertson. He's a right-wing Republican, a Bush supporter in the past. But he had an awakening. His awakening was that he kept looking around him. Tri Robinson, at the Vineyard Boise Church, a church with 3,000 members, looked around him and thought, "This is a cathedral. I live in a cathedral. Look at this beautiful land and yet look at what we are doing to this." And then they go back to Genesis

and the responsibility to take care of the garden. So they have a biblical reference. And he knew that we were destroying the garden. Therefore, he needed to preach about this. But he was scared to do it in his own church, because environmentalists were demonized. So he spent six months going through the Bible and trying to find the language. Finally, he got up the courage one Sunday morning to preach to the clergy about the environment. He got a standing ovation. He never got a standing ovation before in his own church. People afterwards were saying, well, I thought the same thing, but I didn't know we could talk about that. They don't call it environmentalism. They need a new language. So they call it creation-care. What the hell do we care what they call it. Isn't it the same thing? Listen to this. This is riveting. He wrote a book in 2007, *Saving God's Green Earth*:

"Many people perceive the church as conservative and therefore intimately aligned with the Republican Party, which is more interesting to capitalistic strength than environmental stewardship when it comes to managing our beautiful country. It's interesting that conservatives are less likely to support conservation. I believe it's time Christians rediscovered the values we have lost and be on the leading edge of promoting environmental stewardship."

That's huge - 30 million people in these churches. This is a powerful political opportunity. We don't have to go to church with them, but you could be at the café when they come out, couldn't you? Have a cup of coffee and talk about what it is we have in common. This is an enormous possibility here.

### **Standing up**

Well, I believe that we can have the kind of culture, the kind of economy, and the kind of country that we want if we dare to do

something that is essential in our country, and that is *stand up*. That is what you do. You must encourage other people to do it more boldly than we have been doing it and especially in this administration. I know some people say, "We need to give him a chance." Well, let's push him to be bigger than he thinks he can't be. We owe him that and we owe us that.

I was up in Vermont two or three years ago at a political event and a guy came up to me wearing a political button. It was the best one I ever saw. It said, "Wearing A Button Is Not Enough." We can't be a nation of button wearers, can we? Well, be a little stronger than that. Again, that's why you are so crucial to the cause. Those of you gather here studying, warming up against each other, getting to know each other and then going back out and spreading this word.

Susan and I cite Lewis Grizzard, the late great southern humorist, in the book. He said something that we in the South have always known to be true. That is, there is great big difference between being naked and being na-ked. Naked means you have no clothes on. But being na-ked means that you have no clothes on and you are up to something. And that's the way I think of Beyond Pesticides.

So we just got to keep at it. I'm here to urge you to keep on keeping on, and again, more profoundly and more ferociously, more insistently than you have been. We got to get in the face of these powers, because these powers can make the changes. And we got to keep pushing. The previous powers, they wouldn't

make the changes. You know, we don't win the first time out, often not the second or the 20th time out. But that's important to institutions like Beyond Pesticides and Toxic Free NC and your own organizations across the country. Institutions become important because they give people a context to keep the movement going. My friend Willy Nelson said to me once, "Hightower, the early bird may not get the worm, but it's the second mouse that get's the cheese."

Well, one more story from the book. We told about this tourist who was in Bangkok and he came out of the great temple and the glare of the sunlight, and over here was a monk in full regalia. He said to the monk, "May I snap your picture?" And he took the picture. Over here was a boy selling water. He went over here to buy a bottle of water for the monk. He paid for it and waited for his change, but he wasn't forthcoming, so the tourist assumed there was a language problem so he pointed to his palm and said, "Don't I get change?" The boy looked at him and over at the monk and in perfect English said, "Change, change comes from within." That's the good news.

The change is coming from within. It's coming from you. We have to produce the change. I'll leave you with this thought. There was a moving company when I first moved backed to Austin, Texas in the mid-70's. The moving company had an ad that I liked, so I stole it for political purposes. It was actually in the yellow pages and it said, "If we can get it loose, we can move it." Well, that is what you are doing. You are getting it loose at the grassroots level and then the people will move it for themselves.



### **Jim Hightower**

*Mr. Hightower is a national radio commentator and author of many books, including his latest, **Swim Against The Current: Even A Dead Fish Can Go With The Flow**. Mr. Hightower has spent three decades battling the powers that be on behalf of the powers that ought to be. Twice elected Texas Agriculture Commissioner, he has become a leading voice for those who no longer find themselves within shouting distance of Washington and Wall Street. He's a modern-day Johnny Appleseed, spreading the message of progressive populism all across the American grassroots. Read more about his background, books and radio show at [www.jimhightower.com](http://www.jimhightower.com).*

