

Cultivating Climate Justice: Brazilian Workers Leading the Charge Toward Zero Waste

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This is part 1 of a four-part article series “Cultivating Climate Justice” which tells the stories of community groups on the frontlines of the pollution, waste and climate crises, working together for systems change. United across six continents, these grassroots groups are defending community rights to clean air, clean water, zero waste, environmental justice, and good jobs. They are all members of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, a network of over 800 organizations from 90+ countries.

This series is produced by the [Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives \(GAIA\)](#) and [Other Worlds](#).

Cultivating Climate Justice:

Brazilian Workers Leading the Charge Toward Zero Waste

The streets of Belo Horizonte were filled with singing, dancing, chanting, and marching. It was not a holiday or an election day or a soccer game. The chant was: “We don’t want incineration! Recycle! Recycle!” (See this [video](#))

It was September 19, 2014, and this was the launch of a national [Zero Waste Alliance](#), Brazil style. Exuberant, celebratory, and led by recycling workers.

The recycling workers of Brazil have long been a powerful force in protecting their communities and the climate. Now they are on the forefront of a nation-wide movement for zero waste.

Zero Waste: A Just Alternative to Pollution

To those hearing about it for the first time, “[zero waste](#)” may sound unrealistic. But in fact, zero waste alliances are forming all over the world [and making great strides toward building a new kind of economy that is good for people and the planet](#). Zero waste encompasses the full lifecycle of our stuff, starting with reduced extraction and responsible product design, and ending with all materials being reused, recycled, or composted.

The current practice of burning or dumping waste is a major contributor to climate change. Pound for pound, [burning waste is even worse for the climate than the dirty](#)

[practice of burning coal](#). It also releases cancer-causing toxins and other air pollutants. The potential benefits of zero waste for the climate and clean air are enormous.

But at its best, zero waste is about much more than reducing pollution and greenhouse gases.

Whereas incineration and waste dumping [frequently violate the principles of environmental justice](#), zero waste has great potential to improve the lives of people that feel the greatest impacts of our “dig, burn, dump” economy.

This is particularly true when zero waste systems are designed with worker rights at the center, as in the case of Brazil, where recycling workers are at the forefront of the zero waste alliance. And in Brazil, where the workers collaborate closely with local non-governmental organizations like [Instituto Polis](#), the labor-environmentalist alliance is fundamental.

So how did the workers of Brazil get involved in a zero waste alliance? They started by getting organized.

A National Movement of Recycling Workers

Recyclers do the work of collecting and separating out recyclable materials from the waste stream. It’s often a dangerous and low-paying job. But in Brazil—and other Latin American countries, including [Chile](#) and [Colombia](#)—recycling workers have made great strides toward good pay and safe working conditions.

Since its formation in 1999, the Brazil-based [National Movement of Recycling Workers](#) (MNCR) has achieved major victories for the sector. Earlier this year, one of the leading members of the MNCR, Maria Monica da Silva, won a [Living Legacy award for her work](#) “...creating significant improvements in the situation and recognition of the... recyclers in...Sao Paulo, Brazil. The vast majority of these recyclers are women, and together they make an enormous environmental contribution, but the value of their work is too often unrecognized.”

What’s particularly inspiring about the recycling workers’ union in Brazil is that their ambitions for justice go far beyond their own working conditions. The recyclers understand their work as being on forefront of solving the climate, waste, and air pollution crises that impact their families, communities, and the entire world. The first line of the mission statement of the MNCR is to “contribute to building just and sustainable societies through the social and productive organization of recycling workers and their families.” Their mission also includes “improving the quality of life of all people and future generations.”

MNCR started building its power in the way that so many other groups have done: by stopping incineration.

A Force to be Reckoned With

When the incineration company Usina Verde rolled into Sao Paulo in 2002, it was widely expected that their incinerator proposal would move forward quickly and easily.

Instead, [the company was pushed out by a coalition of recycling workers, NGOs, activists, and community members.](#)

Magdalena Donoso, Latin America Coordinator for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), explained that “The recycling workers of Brazil are a force to be reckoned with. Anytime there is a vote, public hearing, meeting, etc., the recycling workers turn up more people than the incinerator company.”

But as with anti-incinerator movements all over the world, the question was always asked in Brazil: If not incinerators, then what? For the recycling workers of that nation, the answer was built into their job description.

The transition from fighting incinerators to working toward zero waste in Brazil came naturally. Beth Grimberg from [Instituto Pólis](#) explained that, “Zero waste alliances were being formed all over the world. We couldn’t miss the opportunity to work on this. We had strong international solidarity and decades of organizing experience. On September 19th, with hundreds of people participating in person or online, we launched the Brazil Zero Waste Alliance.”

Alex Cardoso, a third generation recycler and member of the MNCR, said, “It is important that recycling workers are the primary organizers for zero waste in Brazil. We are the ones on the streets every day making it happen. Our knowledge is critical. We are the principal agents in these conversations and the defenders of the earth.”

There you have it: zero waste is clean air, good jobs, and justice. No wonder the brass band was playing and the crowd was singing down in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Action Alert! On the other side of the ocean, recycling workers of South Africa are currently fighting to protect their livelihoods and the planet against a new threat of incineration. [Please take a minute to support them.](#)

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