PRINCIPLES FOR A ZERO WASTE JUST RECOVERY
ZERO WASTE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Transition is inevitable. Justice is not.

If our cities and communities are to fully recover and rebuild from the ashes of the broken system we find ourselves in, we must pivot away from extractive industry and create just zero waste systems that hold strong when disaster strikes. Our members around the country are demonstrating that zero waste is an essential part of a Just Recovery, and is intertwined with the wider movement for economic, racial, and environmental justice.

In this document, we will use the following People’s Bailout and Movement Generation’s (MG) Just Recovery principles to organize the principles GAIA proposes for a just transition to zero waste and just recovery in the context of waste systems. This document will also serve to:

- Identify movement-building opportunities with other groups who share the same values and overarching goals.
- Situate our work within the current moment and clarify what areas of work we should be emphasizing in our actions and communications.

We are grateful for all those who contributed to the development of the People’s Bailout and MG Just Recovery principles, which we hope to expand on here.
PEOPLE'S BAILOUT PRINCIPLES

1. Health is the top priority, for all people, with no exceptions.
2. Provide economic relief directly to the people.
3. Rescue workers and communities, not corporate executives
4. Make a down payment on a regenerative economy, while preventing future crises.
5. Protect our democratic process while protecting each other.

MOVEMENT GENERATION
JUST RECOVERY PRINCIPLES
(ABBREVIATED, YOU CAN FIND THE FULL VERSION HERE.)

ROOT CAUSE REMEDIES
building towards recovery in ways that account for and address the underlying structural inequalities that set up hurricanes, wildfires, and other disasters to become more powerful and more frequent, and that hit poor and working class communities of color hardest.

REVOLUTIONARY SELF-GOVERNANCE
We must demonstrate that our ability to self-govern is better at meeting our needs, particularly in moments of disaster, than the corporations’ or state’s supposed mandate to govern.

RIGHTS-BASED ORGANIZING
an assertion of the peoples’ right to the resources required to create productive, dignified, and ecologically sustainable livelihoods. That means asserting the right to land, clean water, food, and other resources needed to survive.

REPARATIONS
make material amends for 500 years of colonialism, genocide, and slavery – a root cause of the massive disparity in vulnerability and in access to resources amidst disaster.

ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION FOR RESILIENCE
integrate and honor traditional ecological knowledge, regenerative design, and to build infrastructures with the goal of restoring balance for seven generations to come by relying on the wisdom of the seven generations before.
1. HEALTH IS THE TOP PRIORITY, FOR ALL PEOPLE, WITH NO EXCEPTIONS.

- Harmful forms of waste management like incinerators release pollution that cause illnesses, such as asthma, cardiovascular disease, and cancers, making communities more susceptible to the worst effects of COVID-19. Decision makers must ensure these predominantly black, brown, indigenous, & low-income communities receive free & accessible testing and treatment.

- Waste and recycling workers (and ALL essential workers) deserve paid sick leave, hazard pay, adequate PPE, and worker compensation benefits if they become infected on the job.

- Plastic and other disposable packaging that is being foisted on the public contains thousands of chemicals, some of which have been known to cause cancer, endocrine disruption, reproductive issues, and other serious health harms. Producers must redesign their products to eliminate these toxic impacts, and policymakers must ensure that everyone has access to safe, reusable systems.

- Polluting industries should not be able to use this crisis as a get out of jail free card. Emissions limits for incinerators and other polluting facilities should be strictly and continuously monitored and enforced, not weakened and ignored, and governments must hold the incinerator, petrochemical, and other industries accountable by making them pay for their pollution. Emissions data should be shared publicly online in real-time.

- Deaths from COVID-19 are not just the result of exposure to a new virus. They are the result of decades of policies that have overrun low-income, immigrant, and communities of color with polluting industrial facilities like incinerators, while ignoring the cumulative impacts that these facilities have on people’s health. Who dies from COVID-19 is an environmental justice issue. We must transition to a new normal where the root causes of the COVID crisis in this country are addressed and the industries who have polluted communities for decades are phased out and replaced by systems that support human life. Incinerators must be shut down, for the good of public health during and after this virus, and no new polluting industries should be sited, particularly in BIPOC and low-income communities.

- As we transition to zero waste, we must ensure that waste from the healthcare industry is handled as safely and responsibly as possible. Burning medical waste causes air pollution that makes our communities sicker, undermining the essential work that our healthcare providers are doing to save lives.
As medical waste piles up around the country, many are wondering where it’s all going. Unfortunately for the residents of Marion County, the answer lies in their backyard. The Covanta Marion incinerator is one of several Covanta incinerators suspected of burning COVID-related waste. The facility burns five times as much medical waste as a standard large medical waste incinerator, but has managed to avoid being designated as such, which would make the facility subject to stricter emissions limits and more rigorous monitoring. The plant has also routinely and consistently failed to meet the emissions limits for heavy metals and acid gases for that amount of medical waste, and is the 19th largest single source of greenhouse gas emissions in the state and the highest greenhouse gas emitter in the County. Like close to 80% of all incinerators in the United States, Marion is located in a majority low-income, minority community that has elevated incidences of cancer and respiratory diseases compared to the rest of the state. A coalition of groups are fighting to get the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality to investigate the incinerator and enact stricter emissions limits and monitoring.

Find out more.
Zero Waste workers and community organizers are instrumental in the fight for clean air and a just transition to sustainable systems. Because of the economic downturn and the immediate threats to the survival of communities, many community-based operations are focusing on the bare essentials. We need to support them so that they can continue their essential work in the longer term. Local and regional governments and funding institutions should ensure their survival and longevity.

We are in a recession, and our collective survival depends on the provision of basic social services. Governments must divest all taxpayer funds from harmful institutions -- including prisons, jails, incinerators, landfills, petrochemical plants, and refineries -- and invest them in public well-being. MPD150 describes the importance of a divest/invest approach to transformative social change very clearly: “Dismantling the police will require reallocating their budget and assets to support real solutions to community desperation: good, well-paying jobs, affordable housing, healthy food, empowering education, accessible health care, removal of toxins, etc. Ending the brutal police system is, by necessity, a program for a more just and resilient city.” Abolition is an essential part of a just recovery.

Policy solutions should be designed with a reparative lense. The distribution of economic relief should be prioritized in communities who have been disproportionately harmed by the extractive economy and subjected to the worst of this pandemic.
The Hennepin Energy Resource Center (HERC) sits adjacent to the neighborhoods where most of Minnesota’s black population was segregated through decades of racist urban planning and discriminatory housing practices. The incinerator produces 1,500,000 pounds of emissions each year, causing or exacerbating health conditions that range from asthma to cancer. Now, communities exposed to the incinerator’s toxic fumes are more vulnerable to the worst effects of COVID-19. The communities hit hardest by the pandemic are also the same communities who are most likely to be attacked and killed by police. Non-white Minneapolis residents are more likely to live shorter lives than their white counterparts because of the compounding affects of structural racism. That’s where BIPOC Table comes in — a coalition for Black, indigenous, and people of color organizers and activists, BIPOC Table is building an intersectional environmental justice movement in Minnesota. Their grassroots anti-incineration campaign is intentionally tied to liberation and sheds light on how pandemic, environmental injustice, and state violence come together to impact Black Lives. BIPOC Table models how community resilience in a post-COVID world means addressing the multiple levels of systemic injustice amplified by the impacts of crises.

Support Protesters in Minneapolis.
The plastics industry has asked Congress for a 1 billion dollar bailout to pump more plastic into our already polluted world. We need a People’s Bailout, not a Polluting Industry bailout. Congress must reject legislation that puts money into the pockets of the petrochemical industry, and instead pass legislation that shifts the financial burden of plastic pollution from communities and local governments to the corporations creating the problem, and helps to reduce plastic production overall.

Public money should go towards prioritizing sustaining local reuse, mission-based recycling, composting programs and businesses and good zero waste jobs over large waste management corporations, who should be held accountable to the communities they work in. The current centralized waste management systems often involve trucking waste from wealthy neighborhoods to environmental justice communities miles and miles away, causing further emissions and leaving EJ communities to deal with other people’s garbage. Ultimately, we must transition to decentralized and cooperatively owned waste management structures that create good jobs for community members, and encourage each community to take responsibility for their own waste.

Some cities and counties are exploiting the labor of incarcerated people in running their recycling programs to cut corners. Municipalities lack the budgets for these programs because the corporations creating waste are not held financially responsible for their wasteful practices. The federal government must implement a form of financial producer responsibility that takes the cost burden of waste management off municipal budgets while ensuring the dignity and stable, fair livelihood of all sanitation workers and the residents of the community. Governments at all levels must also work to implement the social policies and restorative justice infrastructure to abolish prisons, which are a modern day incarnation of slavery.
CERO is a composting cooperative in Boston focused on moving the city towards zero food waste, and building stronger, more equitable communities in the process. At the time of CERO’s founding, Boston had an abysmal recycling and waste diversion rate of under 25%, and according to a 2015 study by the federal reserve bank of Boston, white households had a median wealth of $247,500, and Dominicans and U.S. blacks had a median wealth of close to zero. CERO sought to combat that economic injustice head on by creating a diverse, bi-langua worker co-op connected with Boston’s working class and communities of color. The beauty of CERO is that it creates local “closed loop” systems for food, so that instead of disposing of food waste in dirty landfills that people have to live next to, they ensure that food is recycled back into soil that grows nourishing food for the community. And the model is working. So far the cooperative has prevented 11,867,122 lbs of food waste from going to landfills, and saved their customers $407,570 in trash hauling expenses. As the city of Boston unveils its Zero Waste Plan-- to get the city to 80 percent diversion by 2035 and 90 percent diversion by 2050 from recycling and composting-- organizations like CERO are the key not only to reaching these ambitious goals, but transforming Boston into a place where its workers and all its residents can thrive.

Find out more.
4. MAKE A DOWN-PAYMENT ON A REGENERATIVE ECONOMY, WHILE PREVENTING FUTURE CRISES.

- The world needs zero waste now more than ever. Investments in zero waste policies, programs, and infrastructure would help rebuild local economies; reduce toxic pollution + improve health; create good, green jobs; strengthen local food systems, enhance resilience, and mitigate climate change.

- Right now Americans are faced with an impossible choice: their lives or their livelihoods. Many jobs are putting Americans in direct danger of contracting COVID, and our current economic system forces people to engage in work that is actively destroying our planet. But there is another way-- zero waste provides millions of good jobs that can help transition our local economies away from pollution and destruction, and towards systems that put human health first.

- Farmers are being forced to engage in the mass destruction of food because industrial agriculture’s long, complicated supply chains are easily disrupted by disasters. Re-localizing food systems and supply chains will support resilience and prevent food waste and excessive packaging waste while encouraging regenerative agricultural practices like agroecology and sustainable livelihoods.

- Incinerators, plastic-to-fuel, and other burn technologies should not receive any government subsidies for renewable energy credits in order to direct investments toward real renewable energy sources and zero waste solutions. Governments and agencies must expand, strengthen, and clean air regulations so that polluting aging incinerators are finally forced to shut down in favor of zero waste infrastructure.

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In 2011, students at Baltimore’s Benjamin Franklin High School formed Free Your Voice, a student-led social justice organization. Baltimore has the highest rate of air pollution-related deaths in the country, and the high school’s Curtis Bay neighborhood has the highest levels of toxic air pollution in the state of Maryland. With support from United Workers, students stopped an incinerator from being built half a mile away from their school. Those same students are now building the next generation of youth leaders at their former high school by teaching a formal environmental justice curriculum in the classroom and supporting real-life organizing efforts. Under the guidance of United Workers, Baltimore youth initiated the planning process behind the city’s 2020 Fair Development Plan for Zero Waste, a zero waste plan grounded in community needs and goals. Investing in youth leadership and in just zero waste systems strengthens community resilience while preparing us for a just transition to a regenerative economy.

Read the Plan.
Industry is using the disaster capitalism playbook to promote single-use plastic as a “safer” alternative in these times, despite studies showing that the virus in fact lasts longer on plastic than other surfaces. More plastic waste will in fact put communities in more danger, particularly those living near incinerators and petro-chemical plants. Instead of heeding the demands of their constituents, our elected representatives caved to the lobbying pressure of the petrochemical industry and chose to reverse legislation on SUP's, and rollback democratically enacted legislation. We cannot allow industry interests to erode our democratic processes. Lawmakers must listen to the American people’s demands to reduce plastic production.

The 7th Principle of Environmental Justice "demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation."

When we shut down these polluting facilities that are making people sick, the people most impacted by those facilities should decide the future of their community without the industry. Community budgeting, Community Land Trusts, and other inclusive planning processes will maximize community benefits, like growing local food at community gardens and urban farms, prioritizing local businesses, ensuring job creation and quality, and centering investments in environmental justice neighborhoods most burdened by pollution and injustice.
Successful environmental justice campaigns can have the unintended consequence of making neighborhoods long perceived as “undesirable” more attractive to development, driving up real estate prices and the cost of living, resulting in the displacement of working class residents. This phenomenon of “environmental gentrification” means zero waste plans can be a double-edged sword for communities unless paired with comprehensive anti-displacement efforts. When Detroit’s incinerator shut down, it opened the doors to development. Local stakeholders started looking at ways to prevent displacement and place land under community control. Breathe Free Detroit has worked with local housing groups to compile “Rooted We Rise: A Resource Guide to Help Detroiters Stay in our Homes and Strengthen our Neighborhoods”, an anti-gentrification guide with resources on homeowners, rental, utilities, and legal assistance. Organizers distribute the guide by going door-to-door in the areas closest to the incinerator. Anti-displacement efforts are key to making sure those who successfully fought against environmental injustices are able to remain in their homes, reap the benefits of their victory, and continue growing power in their communities.

**Read the Plan. Support their work.**