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RECYCLE OR REIMAGINE

Tracking the Direction of the U.S.
Environmental Movement

By Lara Skinner

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Which Way the Wind Blows

With the dramatic deepening of the environmental crisis, new forms of resistance are emerging to combat the fossil fuel industry's extreme agenda. Since the 1970s, the U.S. environmental movement has grown enormously in size and visibility. This has been particularly true of the movement's mainstream segment, which has received the majority of private funding. However, growing membership and visibility have not consistently translated into concomitant growth in political power.

The professionalized, mainstream environmental movement has largely utilized top-down approaches to fight environmental degradation and climate change. Rooted in "ecological modernization" and "green capitalism," these approaches focus on incremental changes within the current political-economic system. Notwithstanding some significant achievements, they fall short in the face of the current ecological challenges. This is in part because the mainstream movement has done little to inspire grassroots collective action and has been unable to adequately address—or shied away from addressing—the root causes of environmental degradation.

Since the 1980s, various grassroots and environmental justice organizations have been emerging and gaining strength in the U.S. These more radical movements have developed analyses linking the degradation of the environment to the social, political and economic marginalization of the working class, people of color, immigrants, women, and others. The environmental justice movement argues that a fundamental shift in power relations is necessary to prioritize the people's social and environmental needs over corporate profits. In 2009, the climate justice movement, building on the work of these grassroots organizations, emerged on the international stage at the UN Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen, Denmark, where it presented a comprehensive anti-capitalist framework to address the current environmental, climate, social and economic crises.

Lara Skinner, Associate Director of Research at Cornell University's Global Labor Institute, tracks the environmental movement's history and demonstrates how the newly emerging sub-movements challenge the goals, strategies and tactics of mainstream environmental organizations. She argues that these environmental and climate justice organizations, together with like-minded allies, provide the best opportunity to build a participatory movement with real power to address our ecological crisis in a comprehensive way.

As the fight against the fossil fuel industry's extreme energy agenda unfolds, the strength and ingenuity of these alternative organizations could very well determine whether or not the mainstream environmental movement will re-consider current strategies, break ties with fossil fuel corporations, and abandon institutional channels in favor of real systemic change. For one thing is clear: If the fossil fuel industry's agenda continues to dominate as it has, we will all pay the price.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, November 2012*

Recycle or Reimagine

Tracking the Direction of the U.S. Environmental Movement

By Lara Skinner

Numerically, the U.S. environmental movement (EM) has grown significantly since the 1970s. Hundreds of new organizations are formed every year to protect the environment and foster sustainability. Paul Hawken, in his 2007 book *Blessed Unrest*, conducted an assessment of how many organizations are working on environmental issues worldwide. Initially, he estimated that there are 30,000 environmental organizations (EO) worldwide and over 100,000 organizations working on environmental sustainability and social justice issues. However, upon closer examination he realized that his original estimate had only scratched the surface, and that the number of organizations working on environmental and social justice issues globally was likely between one and two million.¹

Although there are thousands of organizations in the U.S. and globally working to address a variety of environmental issues, the effectiveness of these organizations to protect the environment and foster genuine sustainability is seriously in question; in particular, the goals, strategies and tactics of mainstream EOs are in doubt. In short, the numerical growth of EOs has not translated to increased political power or a reduction in environmental degradation. According to data from the League of Conservation Voters, the political strength of the EM has declined since the 1990s. The League concludes that “the environmental lobby is winning votes on significant environmental issues less

than 30% of the time.”² Moreover, the majority of lobbying work done by the EM since the mid-1990s has been to oppose “environmentally bad” legislation, not to pursue legislation that will help build a more sustainable society. To the contrary, the environmental footprint of the U.S grew 280% from 1961 to 2001, U.S. CO₂ emissions increased 8% since 1990, and except for a couple isolated examples (such as reductions in certain air pollutants), environmental degradation is quickly accelerating.³ The U.S. and the rest of the world are facing nothing short of a full-blown environmental and ecological crisis. Overall, the state of the U.S. and global environment is extremely bleak, and this is demonstrated by loss of biological diversity, species extinction, climate change, air and water pollution, desertification, and much more.

For more than three decades, the mainstream EM has focused on legislative, technocratic, market-based, and piecemeal efforts to address the environmental crisis. The hegemonic discourse produced by many corporations and government elites claims that technical solutions such as carbon capture and storage (many of which are still unproven), or market-based solutions like carbon offsets, or piecemeal efforts like automobile tailpipe emissions standards, will allow us to avert or reverse the effects of the current ecological crisis. In reality, this approach—often called “ecological mod-

1 Hawken, Paul. 2007. *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement In the World Came Into Being*.

2 Brulle, Robert J. and J. Craig Jenkins. 2008. “Fixing the Bungled U.S. Environmental Movement.” Contexts.

3 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: <http://epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads11/GHG-Fast-Facts-2009.pdf>.

ernization” or “green capitalism”—does not address the root causes of the environmental crisis, nor does it inspire broad citizen participation or collective action.⁴ Since the 1990s, the current approach, coupled with a growing, well-organized, neo-conservative anti-environmental movement—including climate change deniers and proponents of environmental deregulation—has pushed the mainstream EM into a position of essentially only defending the environmental achievements of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, as this is being written, the mainstream U.S. EM is trying to beat back serious attempts to repeal the authority and slash the budget of the main environmental regulatory body in the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).⁵

Even though the efficacy of the mainstream EM is in serious question, the organizations that make up this movement have received the vast majority of financial support from liberal philanthropists. Between 2000 and 2009, \$10 billion in grants were made to environmental causes, most of it directed to big, mainstream environmental organizations and top-down strategies.⁶ In 2009, EOs with budgets greater than \$5 million received half of all contributions and grants, despite making up only 2% of environmental charities.⁷ At the same time, these organizations spent \$22.4 million in 2009 trying to pass comprehensive federal climate legislation.⁸ In the end, climate legislation was not passed by the U.S. Congress, but even if it had been, the ambition and time scale of the proposed legislation was a far throw from the actions the U.S. must actually take to avoid the catastrophic ef-

fects of climate change. Similarly, global action to mitigate and adapt to climate change—for example via the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process—has not been achieved. What’s more, the current proposals within the UNFCCC process lack serious ambition, both in their timeframe to achieve emissions reductions and in the levels of emissions reductions being proposed by individual countries.

Although there are many concerns regarding the goals, objectives and tactics of the mainstream EM, it is important to note that a number of environmental organizations with new discursive frames have emerged in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, representing environmental justice (EJ), climate justice (CJ), radical, and eco-feminist ideologies. The environmental justice movement (EJM) has commanded national and international attention since it emerged in the 1980s, drawing on the experience of the civil rights, farmworker, anti-toxics, and American Indian movements.⁹ Unlike mainstream EOs, the EJM has employed grassroots, highly participatory, direct action organizing to achieve its goals.¹⁰

Like EJ and CJ organizations, direct action EOs like the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front have embedded their struggle against environmental devastation within a deeper critique of the current capitalist political-economic system, calling for a fundamental shift in U.S. patterns of production and consumption in order to address our main environmental and social problems.¹¹ Many of these more radical movements also see the struggle against patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism as intertwined with the struggle for ecological sustainability.

4 Brand, Ulrich. 2012. Beautiful Green World: On the Myths of a Green Economy, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

5 The Washington Times, 7/21/12: EPA defers regulations for coal-fired power plants; U.S. News, 7/8/11: EPA Budget and Power Under Attack from Republicans.

6 Hansen, Sarah. 2012. “Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environment and Climate Funders”. National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

7 Ibid.

8 Mackinder, Evan. 6/18/2012. “Pro-Environment Groups Outmatched, Outspent in Battle Over Climate Change Legislation”: www.opensecrets.org.

9 Cole, Luke W. and Sheila R. Foster. 2001. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*.

10 Ibid.

11 Tokar, Brian. 1997. *Earth For Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash*.

More recently, the climate justice movement (CJM)—made up of indigenous peoples, small farmers, the women’s movement, the EJM and others—emerged as an internationally coherent force at the UN Climate meetings in Copenhagen, Denmark.¹² Linking the main social problems we face today—worsening inequality, poverty, joblessness, and inadequate health care and education—with the environmental crisis, the CJM demands a society that prioritizes social and environmental needs and the common good above profits and the interests of elites. In doing so, this movement has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to protest and take direct action in communities around the world. For example, the CJM mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to protest in the streets of Copenhagen because

powerful governments weren’t taking serious action to address climate change. The movement has also been a focal point for opposition to the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline in the U.S., organizing the largest civil disobedience actions since the Vietnam War in Washington, DC.

These new, more action-oriented, participatory environmental organizations and movements provide a more realistic platform to advance a vision for a truly sustainable, just society; one that connects the vision and goals of the EM to other key social movements, incites collective action and presents a real challenge to the capitalist, political-economic system that systematically exploits the environment and the working class, in equal measure.

A Snapshot of the U.S. Environmental Movement

Conservation and Preservation Movements Since the Late 1800s

The U.S. environmental movement first emerged in the late 1800s in the form of the conservation and preservation movements. Both were largely comprised of wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon males, at the exclusion of the working class and people of color.¹³ Many mainstream environmental organizations, like the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, were borne out of this first era of environmentalism. Both movements focused exclusively on protection of the natural environment while urban, industrialized areas were seen as centers of pollution and degradation.

The major contribution of conservation and preservation movements to U.S. environmental

history was their assertion that protecting land, air, water and wildlife is a national issue and, as such, the government should play a key role in developing and enforcing its regulation. The U.S. has made a unique and major contribution to the world’s literature through its environmental writing, a genre formed by important leaders and thinkers of the conservation and preservation movements, including John Burroughs, George Perkins Marshall, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Henry David Thoreau. These legends of the early EM spent significant time writing about and photographing natural areas, spurring U.S. residents to see the importance of protecting these areas, especially as cities became more crowded and polluted. The conservation and preservation movements are responsible for successfully advocating for the passage of laws that established national parks and forests and that protected fish and wildlife. Some of the landmark legislation passed during this time includes the establishment of Yellowstone National Park (1872) and

¹² Bond, Patrick. 2011. *Politics of Climate Justice: Paralysis Above, Movement Below*.

¹³ Brulle and Jenkins. 2008, op. cit.; McKibben, Bill. 2008. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*.

Graphic 1. Protest against the Keystone XL Pipeline at the White House, September 2011.



Source: Sierra Club

Yosemite National Park (1890), and the creation of the National Park Service in 1916.¹⁴

Conservationism re-surfaced in the 1980s in the Brundtland Commission report under the guise of “sustainable development.” The report argued that economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability were compatible and could be addressed simultaneously. Although environmental degradation has accelerated from the late 1800s to the present time, this line of reasoning—now called ecological modernization or green capitalism—remains the hegemonic discourse within the EM.

The preservation discourse originally focused on the importance of humans living in harmony with each other and the natural world, as demonstrated by Thoreau’s critique of politi-

cal-economic relations under American industrialism. However, contemporary preservationism is narrowly focused on wilderness protection and is represented to some extent in organizations like the Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, and others.

Modern Environmentalism (1950–1960s)

Modern environmentalism emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and differed significantly from the conservation and preservation movements because it recognized humans as part of the earth’s ecosystem. According to this train of thought, society’s production and consumption patterns impact the quality and health of the environment and, conversely, the quality and health of the environment is intertwined with

¹⁴ McKibben, Bill. 2008, op. cit.

human well-being.¹⁵ The focus of the modern EM was primarily on the latter—cleaning up the environment and controlling pollution in order to improve human health. In short, this period of the U.S. EM linked quality of life to the state of the environment, specifically related to the levels of pollution and toxins in the environment and how they impacted human health.

The main focus of the modern EM was cleaning up the environment and controlling pollution. Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962, drawing significant attention to and raising consciousness of how the natural environment impacts human health. In addition to Carson's book, several major environmental catastrophes shaped this period and helped develop America's "environmental awareness." First, there were garbage strikes and power black-outs in New York City in 1965;¹⁶ second, the Cuyahoga River in Ohio became so contaminated that it caught on fire in 1969.¹⁷ Quality of life was now encompassed under the concept of "nature." Eventually, growing awareness of environmental pollution and toxins led to the first Earth Day in the U.S. in 1970, which brought together 20 million people.¹⁸

The main response of the modern EM to environmental pollution and toxins was to demand that the government protect people from environmental degradation and regulate for environmental quality. The movement was largely successful in achieving this goal. Numerous environmental regulations were drafted and legislated during this time, including the Wilderness Act, Clean Air Act, National Trails Act, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Overall, this discourse of "reform environmentalism" that began in the 1950s and 1960s was a vast improvement over conservation and preservation thought because it recognized hu-

mans as a part of the earth's ecosystem. Moreover, its efforts to get the government to protect humans from environmental degradation and regulate for environmental quality was largely successful and established a framework for environmental regulation that is still mostly in place today. Without these regulations, human exposure to air and water pollution and toxins would undoubtedly be much worse. These regulations were also crucial in protecting some of the last remaining natural areas in the U.S. Unfortunately, this discourse was supplanted in the 1970s by a technicist, market-based discourse that has since become the hegemonic approach to environmental issues in the U.S.

Mainstream Environmentalism (1970s)

In 1970, the first Earth Day was held in the U.S., mobilizing a 20 million-person demonstration. Despite this highly participatory mass mobilization, the mainstream EM was soon born; a "professionalized" movement that focused on engaging with government on administrative regulation. It was in the 1970s that President Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency, an administrative body of lawyers, engineers, scientists, and economists, who created a complex regulatory structure to control pollutants and toxins.¹⁹ In the 1980s, President Reagan introduced and executed an anti-environment, deregulation agenda that many EOs responded to with strategies based on lobbying, compromise, and legal and scientific expertise.

The focus of mainstream EOs on legal, market-based and technocratic solutions to environmental problems alienates the broader public and limits possibilities for alliance building as well as highly participatory collective action. Although the membership of these organizations greatly expanded during this time,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brulle and Jenkins. 2008, op. cit.

¹⁷ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

¹⁸ www.earthday.org/earth-day-history-movement.

¹⁹ Brulle and Jenkins. 2008, op. cit.

their political power and ability to stop environmental degradation declined. Mainstream organizations claimed that raising awareness and educating the public about environmental issues would facilitate social change, but their analysis did not recognize corporations' and political elites' power to shape public discourse. Moreover, their commitment to economic growth and market-based solutions to the environmental crisis limited these organizations to a political agenda that fit within contemporary political-economic relations. Meanwhile, EOs that called for fundamental political-economic change and employed real power building strategies were alienated by mainstream organizations.

The Rise of Grassroots Environmentalism (1980s)

In response to the neoliberal agenda advanced by the Reagan administration and mainstream EOs' market-based responses, the grassroots EM emerged in the U.S., based on a range of ideologies including environmental racism/justice, feminist ecology, deep ecology, bio-regionalism, and spiritual and native ecology. The grassroots EM critiqued mainstream EOs' cozy, "willing to compromise" relationship with industry and government, advocating instead for ecological democracy and citizen participation in environmental decision-making.²⁰

Also during the 1980s, neo-conservatives began to develop and implement a well-planned attack on liberal environmentalism using a network of think tanks, academics and policy institutes.²¹ Their agenda included privatization, deregulation, reducing the welfare state, redistributing wealth and income to investors, and attacking democratic processes. Neo-conservative envi-

ronmental think tanks began attacking the science behind environmental prescriptions that don't conform to the neoliberal agenda, instead promoting market-based solutions to environmental problems. During this same period, the mainstream EM began employing a rearguard strategy to protect the legislative and regulatory gains won in the 1960s and 1970s.

Environmental Justice (1990s)

The environmental justice movement emerged in the 1990s. It became famous for a letter criticizing the "Big 10" mainstream EOs for their narrow focus on wilderness areas and their lack of class, race or gender diversity among their boards, staff and membership.²² The EJM redefined "environment" as all places where we live, work and play.²³ Unlike the mostly white, middle-class membership of mainstream EOs, environmental justice activists are often motivated by an immediate and material stake in solving the environmental problems they confront.

Because they usually have a personal stake in the outcome, EJM participants are often willing to explore a wider range of strategies for change.²⁴ Oftentimes, these communities also distrust the law, spurring them to employ non-legal strategies for social change, including protest and direct action. The EJM is largely comprised of the poor, working class, women and people of color. In contrast to the mainstream EM, which believes that small tweaks the current system can address our environmental problems, EJM participants view the issues in their neighborhoods as connected to larger structural problems including residential segregation, high unemployment, poor education, and inner city disinvestment.

20 www.ontheissues.org/Celeb/Ronald_Reagan_Environment.htm.

21 Conway, Eric and Naomi Oreskes. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*.

22 "Not Man Apart: The Whiteness of the Green Movement." *The Newsmagazine of Friends of the Earth, U.S.A.* April-May 1990: 14-17.

23 Cole and Foster. 2001, op. cit.

24 *Ibid.*

The Current State of the Movement

Today, the environmental movement, both in the U.S. and globally, has much greater visibility and numerical strength than it did four or five decades ago. Unfortunately, the dynamics of the mainstream EM have changed very little since the 1970s. Its focus remains on market-based, technocratic, legislative, and piecemeal solutions to the environmental crisis. As a result, real political power has not grown alongside the size of the EM and, consequently, significant achievements in stopping or reversing environmental degradation have not been accomplished.

Still, mainstream EOs continue to receive the vast majority of financial support from foundations. However, new environmental sub-movements, particularly the environmental and climate justice movements, have been forming, emerging, and growing in the U.S. EM. These new movements challenge the goals and tactics of the mainstream movement and may push mainstream organizations to reconsider their current strategy and/or stand aside to allow these new movements to have a more prominent place in U.S. environmental politics.

What is different in our current era is that there are many more of us inhabiting more of the earth, we have technologies that can do much greater damage and do it more quickly, and we have an economic system that knows no bounds. The damage being done is so widespread that it not only degrades local and regional ecologies, but also affects the planetary environment.²⁵

The following section provides a closer look at the current state of the U.S. environmental movement. The first part of this section reviews the state of the environment in the U.S.

and globally and sheds light on the question of whether the current strategies, tactics and goals of the U.S. EM are working. With the EM having grown numerically and being named the “largest social movement in the world,” what has this meant for its ability to stop or slow environmental degradation and climate change?²⁶

The second part of this section reviews the U.S. EM’s recent record of success on key environmental issues and identifies the main challenges and opportunities to building a powerful, effective movement capable of stemming the environmental and climate crises.

Since 2000, the U.S. EM has focused sharply on fossil fuel consumption and the domestic contribution to global climate change while continuing to work on other major environmental problems like loss of biodiversity, air and water pollution, and loss of open land and forests. In the past 30 years, the U.S. has been very successful at protecting the stratospheric ozone and reducing the emissions that cause acid rain through the Montreal Protocol and the EPA’s Clean Air Act, retrospectively.²⁷ However, on almost all other counts, environmental conditions have worsened, and environmental degradation in the U.S. and globally continues to accelerate. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the state of this movement and assess its effectiveness in addressing the environmental and climate crises, I briefly review the current state of the environment, both in the U.S. and globally.

It was 1988 when climate scientist James Hansen sounded the alarm to the U.S. Congress about the human contribution to CO₂ emissions. More than twenty years later, the record

²⁵ Foster, John Bellamy. 2011. *What Every Environmentalist Should Know About Capitalism*.

²⁶ Hawken, Paul. 2007. *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement In the World Came Into Being*.

²⁷ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

on climate change is bleak. Since 1990, U.S. greenhouse gas emissions have increased by 10.5% (under the Kyoto Protocol, which the U.S. did not sign, developed country emissions were supposed to decrease by 4.2% below 1990 levels).²⁸ More disturbingly, between 2000 and 2007, anthropogenic emissions rose four times faster than during the 1990s.²⁹ Most recently, May 2012 was the warmest May on record in the Northern Hemisphere and was also the “327th consecutive month in which the temperature of the entire globe exceeded the 20th century average.”³⁰ To date, humans have raised the average temperature of the planet by 0.8 degrees Celsius. The effects of this change have been far worse than scientists predicted.

One-third of the Arctic’s summer sea ice is gone.³¹ Global average sea levels rose 0.07 inches per year during the 1900s, but rose 0.1 inches per year since the 1990s.³² Climate change has caused 90% of mountain glaciers to visibly retreat, and under a business as usual-scenario, they could be completely gone by 2100.³³ The deflation and retreat of glaciers will lead to more and more floods and water scarcity, as it has already done in parts of the world like Bolivia and Peru.³⁴ As the ocean tries to absorb carbon, it acidifies. As the ocean’s ability to absorb carbon decreases, the build-up of carbon in the atmosphere will accelerate. Already, marine ecosystems are threatened with collapse because of ocean acidification. In the 1960s, there were 49 oceanic dead zones; as of 2008, there were 405.³⁵ Climate change has seriously impacted biodiversity and species survival by shifting the ranges in which species can survive and reproduce, and by shifting the timing

of biological events. In order to stay within a tolerable climate range, 40% of wild plants and animals have relocated.³⁶ Others have no place left to go. Almost every projection made by the preeminent scientific body on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has been exceeded over the last decade.

The impact climate change will have on humans has also recently become much more concrete. Extreme weather events have become an almost daily occurrence in the U.S. To name a few examples: in July, record high temperatures in Texas caused an airplane jet to get stuck in melting asphalt and a subway car to derail after its track stretched so much it kinked; meanwhile, a nuclear plant in Illinois had to receive special permission to keep operating after the temperature of its cooling pond rose to 102 degrees (it’s suppose to stay under 100 degrees); and massive forest fires in the Western U.S. are threatening to close water reservoirs due to falling ash.³⁷ Clearly, the extent and the intensity of the climate crisis have far-reaching consequences both for human survival and health, and for other species. Moreover, the working class, people of color, women, immigrants and others marginalized by the capitalist system are disproportionately impacted by these problems.

While mainstream environmental organizations have focused on raising awareness of and finding solutions to climate change, the degradation of the environment more generally has accelerated as well. Over 17,000 plants and animals in the U.S. are at risk of extinction due to climate change and ecosystem damage.³⁸ “More than one in five of all known mammals, over a quarter of reptiles and 70% of plants are under threat.”³⁹ Since 2006, over one-third of honey-

28 Ibid.

29 Schor, Juliet. 2010. *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*.

30 McKibben, Bill. 8/2/2012. “The Reckoning.” *Rolling Stone Magazine*.

31 Ibid.

32 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

33 McKibben, Bill. 2012, op. cit.

34 Foster, John Bellamy. 2011, op. cit.

35 Schor, Juliet. 2010, op. cit.

36 IUCN Red List version 2012.1.

37 The New York Times, 7/25/12: Weather Extremes Leave Parts of U.S. Grid Buckling.

38 NBCNews.com, 11/3/09: Over 17,000 species threatened by extinction.

39 Center for Biological Diversity, 2011.

Graphic 2. Surface Mining Pit in the Western U.S.



Source: www.smartmines.com.

bee hives in the U.S. have disappeared, and they continue to decline dramatically today. As plant and tree pollinators, honeybees are an integral part of maintaining healthy ecosystems and agricultural systems. Similarly, since 2006 more than a million little brown bats in the U.S. have died from white-nose syndrome. In both cases, the collapse of these species is linked to environmental degradation, including genetically modified plants, widespread use of pesticides, and disease breakouts related to environmental stress.⁴⁰ Species loss is directly linked to habitat and ecosystem destruction—globally, the destruction of forests contributes 25% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Toxins from pollution, pharmaceuticals, pesticides, heavy metals, and synthetic chemicals are now widely found in our air, water, soil, and even our own bodies. A U.S. government study found that “90% of the waters and fish tested

across the country are contaminated with pesticides” and “independent research has found more than 200 chemicals, many of them toxins, in the blood of newborns.”⁴¹ Incredibly, of the more than 84,000 chemicals in commercial use in the U.S., the composition and potential harmfulness of 20% are unknown. Because their composition falls under the category of “trade secrets,” it can be legally withheld.⁴²

“Trash islands” in the ocean, like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, are now common. These islands contain toxic sludge, “light bulbs, bottle caps, popsicle sticks and tiny pieces of plastic.”⁴³ These trash islands have doubled in size every decade, and the Pacific trash island is thought to be about 1.3 million square kilometers, or twice the size of Texas.⁴⁴

41 Center for Biological Diversity.

42 Foster, John Bellamy. 2011, op. cit.

43 Ibid.

44 Cole and Foster. 2001, op. cit.

40 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2012.

The intensity and breadth of environmental degradation is easier to understand when one looks more closely at how consumption patterns have changed in the U.S. In 2007, 70% of U.S. GDP was devoted to personal consumption.⁴⁵ Personal expenditures in the U.S. were \$32,144, while the global average income is only \$8,500. Since 1990, average real per person spending has increased 42%. In a chapter titled, “From Consumer Boom to Ecological Bust,” Juliet Schor uses the example of clothing and electronics to demonstrate the explosion of fast-moving consumer goods. In 1991, Americans bought an average of 34 clothing items per year; in 1996, it increased to 41; by 2007, Americans bought an average of 77 clothing items per year, or a new item every 5.4 days. Schor also found that between 1998 and 2007, the weight of imported electronics to the U.S. increased by 75%; this is especially notable considering the extent to which electronics have shrunk in weight and size. Americans are also living in bigger houses—in 1980, the average

single family dwelling was 1,740 square feet; in 2000, it’s 2,521 square feet. Despite having bigger homes, one in ten households now rent storage space.⁴⁶

Clearly the massive increase in the production and consumption of nondurable goods has contributed significantly to environmental degradation and is an unsustainable model from an environmental and climate perspective. This model is also unsustainable for workers, communities, and society more broadly—cheap goods based on low wages as well as on precarious and poor working conditions—contribute to growing social inequality both in the U.S. and globally.

The scale and intensity of resource consumption, environmental degradation, and climate change demonstrates that a serious evaluation of the U.S. EM’s current goals, strategies, and tactics is needed if we want to have a chance of avoiding catastrophic environmental degradation.

The Movement’s Recent Record on Key Issues

Assessing the current state of the U.S. and global environment is important because it clearly illustrates that, despite the fact that the EM is growing in size, environmental degradation has intensified and a new approach to achieving environmental sustainability is needed. Frankly, what the majority of U.S. EOs have been doing for the last 40 years is not working. To illustrate this point, I briefly review the EM’s record of success on key environmental issues over the last several decades.

The mainstream EM and many segments of the grassroots movement fought hard to elect President Obama and had high hopes that his administration would pursue an ambitious climate protection and environmental agenda. Main-

stream environmentalists expected Obama to pass a federal climate bill to cap U.S. emissions. Not only would this bill mandate emissions reductions and investment in clean energy in the U.S., but it would also legislate the U.S.’s commitment to reduce emissions as part of a global agreement on climate change. In response to the 2008 financial crisis, environmentalists also expected Obama to craft a financial stimulus package that prioritized clean energy investments and created green jobs.

Indeed, Obama was the first U.S. presidential candidate that campaigned about the need to address climate change. In his election victory speech, he said his election would mark the time “the rise of the oceans began to slow

⁴⁵ Schor, Juliet. 2010, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

and the planet began to heal.”⁴⁷ Although, truth be told, Obama rarely used the term “climate change” in his campaign speeches and often used the more ambiguous term “clean energy” when he described the new economy the U.S. needed to build to address both environmental and economic issues. Moreover, his comments about building a “clean energy” economy were often premised on national competitiveness and the need for the U.S. to maintain its position as a global power by capturing the market share around clean energy manufacturing and production. In practice, this has meant the U.S. State Department dishonoring the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” (the idea that each country must mitigate its emissions and assist with adaptation according to its historical contribution to climate change) in international climate negotiations and advocating for intellectual property rights that privilege corporate interests and impede technology transfer to reduce emissions.

Despite Obama’s weak approach toward climate protection, the mainstream EM contributed \$1.2 million towards getting Obama elected in 2008, and is projected to spend a similar amount towards his 2012 election.⁴⁸ Although \$1.2 million is a huge amount in the world of grassroots organizations and social movements, the oil and gas industry spent \$35.6 million on the 2008 election, 77% of which went to Republicans.⁴⁹ That means that the oil and gas industry contributed more than \$8 million to Obama and other Democrats, and in total outspent environmental interests by a factor of 35 times in the election.

Since Obama took office in 2008 his overall record on environmental issues has been weak. This record includes the green component of the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the failure to pass federal climate legislation, and the U.S. role in the UNFCCC international climate negotiations. When federal climate negotiations collapsed, mainstream EOs pivoted to focus on the potential to reduce emissions through EPA regulation and sub-national climate efforts. As part of my assessment of these efforts, I will also discuss the lone highlight of climate action in the last four years—the passage of EPA fuel economy standards for vehicles.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)

In addition to the \$700 billion authorized for the bank bailout during the Bush administration and the \$80 billion auto industry bailout, Obama implemented a fiscal stimulus package called the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.⁵⁰ ARRA’s stated purpose was to stimulate economic growth and spur job creation. Funding totaled \$787 billion, \$93 billion of which was spent on “green” economic activities.⁵¹ Recent analysis of these green funds estimate that 997,000 “green” jobs and indirect jobs were either created or saved.

Overall, it is estimated that ARRA created or saved 3.4 million jobs.⁵² However, ARRA clearly did not reverse joblessness or the economic crisis in the U.S., though it may be said that the unemployment situation would be worse had it not been passed.

Most EOs applauded Obama for his attention to low-carbon activities in ARRA. However, the Act has not proven to be the down payment to expedite the transition to a low-carbon economy

47 McKibben, Bill. 2012, op. cit.

48 Opensecrets.org, 6/18/2012: “Pro-Environment Groups Outmatched, Outstpent in Battle Over Climate Change Legislation”. www.opensecrets.org/news/evan-mackinder/2010/08.

49 Ibid.

50 The official name of the bank bailout was the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). The funding allocated to the auto bailout was part of TARP.

51 Walsh, Jason, Josh Bivens, and Ethan Pollock. *Rebuilding Green: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Green Economy*. The Blue-Green Alliance and the Economic Policy Institute, Feb. 2011.

52 Ibid.

that many hoped it would be. Several analyses have revealed three main issues with it. First, the agencies that were granted money, particularly for green activities like building retrofits, were not prepared to handle the large scale of funding they received. Most of these programs had administered small amounts of funding for most of their institutional existence and simply didn't have the capacity to process and distribute the large amount of funding from ARRA quickly or efficiently.

Second, while ARRA was a good first step towards building a low-carbon economy in the U.S., in the absence of other federal climate protection policies there was no clear or sustained message on climate protection from the Obama Administration or the U.S. Congress. Without a stable policy environment, there is a serious lack of investments to develop and deploy low-carbon infrastructure and technologies in the U.S.

Third, ARRA was a fiscal stimulus package largely spent on corporate tax breaks and subsidies to help boost the private sector's purchase of goods and services. The idea is that eventually, through the multiplier effects of these tax cuts and expenditures, demand is increased enough for private businesses to hire more workers. As a result, some of the money was spent hiring or retaining employees and on green activities, but there was no direct link between that money and job creation or emissions reductions. A more effective way of addressing the jobs crisis would have been to take a New Deal-style approach, with the government directly employing people to do socially and environmentally necessary work.

Philip Harvey, in his recent *Demos* article based on a larger study of ARRA funds, estimates that a public, direct hire program could create one million direct jobs and 414,000 indirect jobs with an investment of \$46.4 billion. Furthermore, having one million people working instead of

unemployed would generate additional government revenue and savings that would reduce the total cost of the program to \$28.6 billion per million jobs.⁵³ Because an ARRA-type stimulus strategy requires a large amount of spending to achieve modest gains in employment and is slow to create jobs, Harvey argues it is not nearly as effective or efficient as a "front-loaded, direct job creation" program that creates jobs immediately and spurs the multiplier effect of jobs-program spending.

Some left segments of the international labor, environmental and the climate justice movements have recognized that a new approach is needed for job creation to happen on the scale required to address the current unemployment rates as well as the climate crisis. As a result, these groups are advocating for a "just transition/climate jobs" program. In short, the idea is to advance a public job creation program similar to those fashioned during the New Deal to meet science-based emissions reduction targets in a way that puts people to work completing projects that result in measurable and significant emissions reductions. Such an approach has not been embraced by the mainstream EM for obvious reasons. Namely, many mainstream EOs partner with corporations on their environmental initiatives and receive funding from corporate interests to do their work. They also have formed close relationships with elected officials in order to advance their legislative agendas. These same politicians rely on campaign contributions from various fossil fuel and other corporations to get re-elected.

Millions of Dollars and Years Later, Still No Federal Climate Legislation

The main focus of mainstream environmentalists in 2008 was passing federal climate legislation. They expected Obama to champion it, and

⁵³ Harvey, Philip. "Back to Work." A Public Jobs Proposal for Economic Recovery." *Demos*, March 7, 2011.

they dedicated massive resources to lobbying for it. However, after years of drafting, debating and lobbying, the bill was voted down in Congress. The Senate version of the bill was S. 1733 “Clean Energy Job and American Power Act” and the House version, H.R. 2454 “American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES).” ACES passed the House in June 2009, but when it subsequently failed to pass the Senate, the debate on climate legislation ended in July 2010.

In 2009, in the midst of the climate bill debate, mainstream environmental groups spent \$22.4 million on federal lobbying efforts. The top 3 spenders, The Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense Fund, and World Wildlife Fund, spent more than \$6 million. Meanwhile, in 2009 and the first half of 2010, the oil, gas and coal industry spent \$543 million lobbying to ensure climate legislation did not pass, or if it did, that their interests were well protected. The industry’s lobbying efforts outspent environmental organizations by 25 times. ExxonMobil alone spent \$27 million, more than all green groups combined.⁵⁴ The alternative energy lobby also spent about \$46 million in the period between 2009 and early 2010.

After a climate bill failed to pass, from both within and outside the movement criticized the “Big Greens” strategy of relying on Democrats and focusing solely on passing a federal climate bill to tackle climate change. More interesting was the “Big Green” commitment to the bill even after it had been seriously diluted in scope and ambition by industry interests, politicians, and others. ACES was the more ambitious of the two climate bills, and in the version that passed it only called for modest emissions reductions. Only Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth withdrew their support for the bill once it became too plagued with market-based mechanisms like emissions offsets,

low ambition targets, and huge subsidies for carbon capture and storage.

In contrast, the EJ and CJ movements in the U.S. were vocal in their opposition to the bill because of how it pandered to industry interests. In many ways, the CJM developed its critique of market-based approaches to climate protection based on the federal bills that were considered. The EJ and CJ movements pointed out that the bills lacked ambition in their scale and timeframe to address climate change. This is a major concern for the movements, because disadvantaged communities are less responsible for climate change yet will be disproportionately impacted by it. The EJ/CJ movements also raised concerns about carbon offset systems, which allow companies to continue polluting in low-income neighborhoods while purchasing offsets to “save” rainforests in other parts of the world. Moreover, the CJM pointed out that these mechanisms were plagued with loopholes that made it difficult to know if companies were actually fulfilling their offset activities.

The failure to pass a federal climate bill did incite many EOs to do some serious soul searching about their goals, strategies, and partners in change. Mainstream EOs were roundly criticized for their obsession with passing a federal climate bill, even after it had been seriously compromised. Even foundations that support work on environment and climate issues were criticized for expending the vast majority of their resources on attempting to pass a federal bill rather than on grassroots, participatory actions that were having an impact in communities. This sentiment was clearly articulated in a letter from 1Sky in 2011.⁵⁵ In fact, the subsequent attention paid by mainstream EOs to fighting extreme energy agendas such as the Keystone XL pipeline and fracking efforts, may be attributed

⁵⁴ All figures in: Mackinder, Evan. 6/18/2012. “Pro-Environment Groups Outmatched, Outspent in Battle Over Climate Change Legislation.”

⁵⁵ 1 Sky: An open letter to all people and organizations working to combat global warming (www.1sky.org/openletter).

to the criticism they received in 2008-2010 for taking a legislative, technocratic and piecemeal approach to fighting climate change. (The EM's recent strategy concerning extreme energy will be discussed below.)

No Global Agreement, No U.S. Commitment

Alongside their push to pass federal climate legislation, mainstream greens as well as grassroots and environmental justice organizations have dedicated significant time and resources to the U.S.'s role in obtaining an international climate agreement through the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties. The UNFCCC process was established at the first Rio Summit on Sustainable Development in 1992 and the first COP took place in 1995. After 17 years of meetings, national governments have not agreed to firm commitments or a timescale for action on climate change mitigation or adaptation.

The failure to reach a global agreement is largely due to the U.S. government's unwillingness to act on climate change. Not recognizing its historic contribution to climate change, the U.S. has not committed to reducing its emissions to the levels or within the timeframe that science demands, or to providing funding and support to the Global South to mitigate and adapt to climate change there. The U.S. never signed the Kyoto Protocol, and because of its unwillingness to agree to legally binding emissions reduction targets, the continuation of the Kyoto Protocol is also in jeopardy (Phase I is expiring in 2012). At COP 15 Copenhagen, where many environmental and civil society organizations, and even some governments, expected a global agreement on climate change, the U.S. "committed" to a non-binding agreement to reduce its emissions by 17% on 2005 levels by 2020. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) called for the U.S. (and other developed

countries) to reduce its emissions to 25-40% below 1990 levels by 2020. President Obama's 17% below 2005 commitment is equivalent to 3% below 1990 levels. The U.S. also introduced the concept of non-binding national commitments at COP 15 through the Copenhagen Accord.

Most EOs agree that the U.S. must drastically increase the ambition of its action on climate change by raising its emissions reduction targets, providing funding to Global South nations to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and signing on to a second phase of the Kyoto Protocol. However, the big, mainstream greens diverge from grassroots, participatory organizations like 350.org, CJ organizations, and left EOs on two main points on reaching equitable, and science-based action on climate change: first, the strategy and tactics; and second, the policies and approaches.

On the second point, most mainstream U.S. EOs have been willing to applaud the small, incremental steps of the U.S. and other governments in the UNFCCC process, even as the most important and difficult issues are avoided. For example, following both COP 15 and COP 16, many mainstream organizations applauded the U.S. and other countries for getting negotiations back on track and making tangible progress on several key issues, such as climate financing, technology transfer, deforestation, adaptation, and establishing a goal for limiting global average temperature increases. Left EOs, grassroots organizations, and CJ organizations, however, perceive these actions as distractions from the most important issues: emissions reduction targets, the future of the Kyoto Protocol, and a legally binding framework versus a framework based on voluntary pledges. These organizations focus on what they see as a core set of questions that need to be addressed: Which countries will be responsible for reducing their emissions and by how much? Will all developed countries agree to legally binding,

science-based emission reduction targets or only voluntary pledges under the UNFCCC process? Will developed countries agree to a second commitment period of the legally binding Kyoto Protocol? And, will developed countries provide sufficient funding for the mitigation and adaptation efforts of developing countries?

The CJM, which includes small farmers, indigenous peoples, left trade unions, and grassroots environmental and social justice organizations, is rooted in the environmental justice and anti-capitalist, anti-globalization movements of the 1990s but clearly emerged and solidified at COP 15 Copenhagen. The CJM has developed a coherent criticism of international negotiations, namely the neoliberal, corporatist, capitalist approach to climate change that is currently being pursued. The movement has framed two distinct approaches to climate protection: the current approach, which they label “false solutions,” and an alternative, anti-capitalist approach, which they call “genuine solutions.” Climate justice organizations point out that “false” solutions to climate change, such as trade liberalization, privatization, carbon markets, agro-fuels, clean coal, and carbon offsetting, are all attempts to maintain and expand the capitalist economy by commodifying and financializing nature. Alternatively, “genuine” solutions to the climate crisis include leaving fossil fuels in the ground; science-based emissions cuts based on countries’ historical and current contribution to climate change; radically reducing wasteful consumption; repayment of climate debts between the Global North and South; people’s sovereignty over energy, forest, land, water, and food; and a just transition to a renewably powered planet. Clearly the CJM views the ecological crisis, the current economic crisis, and growing inequality as intertwined products of the current political-economic system. As a result, the solution to these problems requires an anti-capitalist transformation of the political-economic-ecological system based on social solidarity, economic democracy, and broad-based movement

building. Only a couple of EOs in the U.S., for instance Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, share a similar analysis of the current situation. All others believe a combination of individual change and greening of the existing capitalist system—which can also be described as ecological modernization—will address the environmental and climate crisis. As a result, they view governments and corporations as important agents of change and, as such, allies in their efforts to address climate change.

Connected to the previous point about the vision of “ecological modernization” through alliance with government and the corporate sector, the other main area where U.S. EOs diverge in their approach to international negotiations is on how to make sure the U.S. and other countries take an equitable, science-based and legally binding approach to climate change. Many mainstream EOs have pursued an “inside” strategy that includes meeting with high-level diplomats and ambassadors about specific issues, such as REDD (reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation) and climate financing mechanisms. Like the story of U.S. federal climate legislation, this strategy has produced little and corporations and industry interests seem to have greater influence in the negotiations than ever before. In contrast, participatory grassroots organizations like 350.org have focused on mass movement, direct action strategies that bring high profile attention to leaders’ failure to act on climate change. CJ organizations have joined these actions and have also been very active in organizing a parallel process during negotiations in which social movements, left trade unions, indigenous people, farmers, and others craft their own approaches and responses to climate change. The predominant narrative in these meetings, and one that has gained traction more broadly now, is that “system change” is necessary because climate change as well as the economic crisis, growing social inequality, and other social ills, are rooted in the current capitalism system.

At Rio+20, 50,000 people attended the People's Summit, the social movement alternative to the official negotiations. At the Summit, left social movements' criticism of the current neoliberal, market-based approach to climate change congealed around this idea of "rejecting the green economy." Even at the International Trade Union Confederation 2nd Trade Union Assembly on Labour and Environment, a trade union resolution was passed that recognized "our current profit-driven production and consumption model, identified as the source of rising social inequalities and environmental degradation, must be replaced if a truly sustainable development is to be achieved," and demanded that "the Commons, natural and energy resources" be "brought and kept under public ownership, securing their public preservation and administration with social control." It also called for "a strong, organized global movement [...] to spur governments and corporations, who are reluctant to act, into taking appropriate measures to tackle and stop climate change."⁵⁶ This statement reflects the left tradition of several unions in Latin America as well as their close contact with the growing CJM, which has developed this critique of the current green economy discourse, as mentioned above.

The failure of international negotiations to produce firm commitments or a timescale for action on climate change mitigation or adaptation has seriously called into question the current goals, strategies, and tactics of the mainstream EM. While dozens of representatives of U.S. EOs have attended these international negotiations, a major demonstration has never been organized to raise awareness about the climate crisis and to put public pressure on government officials to take action. Unfortunately, the lack of action on climate change has only caused some left environmental and environmental/climate justice organizations to

demand system change to address climate change. However, the CJM is not yet strong enough to fill the vacuum left by government's inaction on climate change.

EPA and Sub-National Climate Protection Efforts

As of July 2010, when the federal climate legislation died, many environmental organizations reassessed their approach to climate change; as a result, several fronts have emerged. Climate justice, grassroots, and left environmental organizations viewed the defeat of the bill as a victory in some ways. They argued that by calling for adequate emissions reductions and by reflecting the heavy influence of industry interests, the bill could cause more harm than good for the environment and the vast majority of people. Consequently, these organizations returned to what they had been doing all along—namely building grassroots, community-based, participatory opposition to climate change and environmental injustices and support for an equitable and environmentally sustainable low- or zero-carbon economy. Many mainstream EOs are looking to other strategies to reduce emissions that are not reliant on congressional support. This largely includes the Environmental Protection Agency and sub-national efforts to reduce emissions, including regional greenhouse gas markets, state level renewable energy standards, and other sub-national programs that incentivize low-carbon activity. The status of these efforts is reviewed briefly below.

The EPA is the main federal agency that regulates air and water pollution in the United States. A Supreme Court decision in 2010 decided that global warming pollution is a hazard to human health and as such can be regulated by the EPA.⁵⁷ Many EOs have focused on using this

⁵⁶ International Trade Union Confederation: Resolution—2nd Trade Union Assembly on Labour and Environment.

⁵⁷ The New York Times, 06/26/12: Court Backs E.P.A. Over Emissions Limits Intended to Reduce Global Warming.

opening to reduce greenhouse gas emission in the U.S. Several new rules to reduce emissions and pollutants have been proposed in the last couple of years. However, most EOs agree that the ambition of these rules is overly modest. More importantly, many of these regulations were supposed to have been enacted and/or updated years ago, but because of persistent legal and other challenges from the industries that would be impacted by these rules, the process of updating and enacting these rules has been delayed by years.

There are several rules currently being considered that are specifically related to greenhouse gas reduction. The EPA is expected to release regulations on emissions from power plants in 2012, which is particularly relevant considering that one-third of U.S. emissions come from power plants. However, the release of this rule has been delayed several times and at this point will only apply to new power plants, excluding those that already exist. The EPA is also going to release rules to regulate other forms of pollution from power plants, including mercury, SO₂ and NO_x. However, a rule regarding ozone has been delayed until 2012. A suite of rules focused specifically on pollution from the oil and gas industry was proposed in July 2011. Once implemented, this could substantially limit methane emissions from oil and gas operations.

While the EPA is trying to implement rules to regulate air pollution and greenhouse gas, the House has approved a number of measures that aim to strip the EPA and other federal agencies of their power to regulate for air, water, health, and land protection, or to incentivize energy efficiency and renewable energy. In 2012 alone, House Republican leaders have included dozens of "riders" (typically unrelated provisions attached to a bill) that would delay or strip existing protections for air, water, land, health and species. For example, various House Republican leaders have attached riders to leg-

islation that would: prohibit the Department of Energy (DoE) from issuing or administering new loan guarantees for renewable energy projects; permanently block the EPA from clarifying which streams and wetlands are protected by the Clean Water Act; prevent the DoE from providing full funding for the weatherization assistance program and from using media to promote alternative clean energy technologies as a way of reducing fossil fuel use; and finally, prevent the government from shutting down the proposed nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.⁵⁸

Thus far, this barrage of anti-environmental measures has not made it through the Senate, and the Obama Administration has signaled that it would veto such measures if they did manage to pass. The passage of many of these bills would reverse environmental progress that was made as long as 40 years ago. As a result, many mainstream EOs have been and expect to be intensively engaged in rearguard action to combat House Republican efforts to delay or repeal environmental protection action, at least through the November 2012 election and probably longer.

The EPA's ability to regulate for air and water pollution and to reduce greenhouse gas pollution through the various rules mentioned above is important, particularly to disadvantaged communities that are disproportionately impacted by these environmental problems. However, the amount of time, effort and resources it will take to defend and enforce these rules is not proportional to the modest environmental and human health gains that will be produced. Rather than continually engaging with and combatting House Republicans' efforts to repeal and weaken these rules, mainstream EOs should consider bolder goals and different strategies for genuine environmental and climate protection.

⁵⁸ Natural Resources Defense Council: www.nrdc.org/legislation/2011riders.asp.

Sub-National Climate Protection Efforts

In the same way that mainstream EOs have pivoted to using EPA regulations to reduce emissions after the federal climate bill failed to pass, they have also turned to implementing policies and programs at the city, state, and regional level to impede environmental degradation and fight climate change. The political dynamic in many U.S. cities, states and regions is different than at the national level. Citizens often have greater access and can influence political leadership, sometimes forcing progressive leaders to address environmental and climate issues. That said, the vast majority of these programs are market-based, incentivization schemes, such as cap-and-trade, that certain states and regions are able to pass and implement but that have yet to be particularly successful in significantly reducing environmental degradation or emissions.

The best-known regional climate program in the U.S. is the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, also known as RGGI. It is a cap-and-trade program that encompasses the power generation sector in nine states in the Northeast. RGGI has set a cap on CO₂ emissions at 188 million tons, and the cap will decrease 2.5% each year 2015-2018 for an aggregate 10% reduction by 2018. In order to ensure that all nine states agreed to implement RGGI, the cap is incredibly modest, and there are enough offsets available at this point that no company actually has to reduce its emissions to stay below it. The RGGI system has raised over \$1.6 billion in revenue for all participating states since 2008. Each state has used the revenue to increase energy efficiency, creating an estimated 16,000 jobs in energy efficiency work, reducing the region's payment for out-of-state fossil fuels by \$765 million and also reducing energy bills by \$1.3 billion.

RGGI has been under review in 2011-2012, and many regional, mainstream EOs have called for the cap to be lowered slightly and for the

system to encompass all economic sectors, not just power generation. Environmental and climate justice communities in the Northeast have raised serious concerns about RGGI regarding the inequity and ineffectiveness of using market-based mechanisms and carbon offsets to address climate change. These communities have also argued that the revenue from the RGGI system should be used to train and guarantee jobs for communities that have been most impacted by pollution, climate change, and other environmental injustices. Overall, the RGGI cap-and-trade system would need to drastically reduce its cap, limit offsets, and expand to all economic sectors to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the levels demanded by science by 2018. The current goals for the RGGI system, even if they are achieved, are not ambitious enough.

In addition to RGGI, there are cap-and-trade systems being developed in the Western U.S., notably the Western Climate Initiative and the Midwest Regional Carbon Pact. California is the only U.S. state that has passed legislation (in 2011) to develop a cap-and-trade system. California's legislation has drawn significant attention because the state's economy is the largest in the U.S. and would figure eighth on a list of countries in the world. While more ambitious than RGGI, it still only calls for a reduction to 1990 levels by 2020, while the IPCC calls for a 25-40% reduction below 1990 levels by 2020. Moreover, the system has been plagued with a number of problems related to how the state tracks emissions (requiring funding, staff, and so on to monitor and enforce), legal challenges from corporations and industry interest groups, and more. Many other U.S. states have legislated emissions reduction goals (even science-based ones) and climate action plans but are not pursuing adequate actions to meet their goals or plans.

Another policy that many mainstream environmental organizations have pursued on the state level is renewable energy standards, also known

as renewable portfolio standards (RPS). Currently, 33 states and the District of Columbia have RPS's requiring that anywhere from 4% to 33% of electricity be generated from renewables by a specific date.⁵⁹ Electricity suppliers can comply with the RPS by owning a renewable energy facility and its output generation or by purchasing renewable energy certificates or electricity from a renewable facility. California has the most ambitious RPS in the country, with investor-owned utilities, electric service providers and community choice aggregators all being required to increase their shares of renewables to 33% by 2020.⁶⁰ In 2011, the three largest investor-owned utilities served 20.6% renewable power, and utilities must average 20% renewables over the period 2011-2013. At this point, California is on track to meet its RPS targets. In comparison to countries like Germany, which recently produced more than 50% of its electricity from renewables on one day, California's targets are still weak.⁶¹ These goals are also modest compared to President Obama's State of the Union address call for 80% of the U.S.'s electricity to come from clean energy sources by 2035. Obama's call also raises the issue of what are considered renewables. The definition varies from state to state but typically includes hydroelectric, nuclear, natural gas, and biomass, which many would agree are not truly renewable and environmentally sustainable forms of energy.

The efforts to reduce emissions through EPA regulation and sub-national climate protection policies and programs have an important role to play in the overall program to address the climate crises. To date, however, these policies and programs have struggled to achieve the scale or time frame necessary to reduce emissions to the levels that science demands.

Moving forward, an important question for all elements of the U.S. environmental movement

59 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

60 California Energy Commission.

61 The Guardian Online, 05/28/12: Solar power generation world record set in Germany.

is: How do we bring sub-national climate protection efforts to bear in a way that addresses the urgency and intensity of climate change?

U.S. Emissions Reductions in the Transportation Sector

The lone bright spot on the Obama Administration's action agenda for climate change has been its announcement that it would raise national vehicle standards to 54.5 miles per gallon, reducing emissions from cars and light trucks by 50% by 2025. The EPA and Department of Transportation also implemented efficiency and greenhouse gas standards for medium- and heavy-duty vehicles. These standards are expected to reduce CO₂ emissions by 270 million metric tons over the next couple of decades. The new fuel efficiency standards are, in the words of Bill McKibben, "the kind of measure, adopted a quarter-century ago, that would have helped enormously."⁶²

Although Obama has been widely applauded for increasing U.S. vehicle fuel economy standards, and mainstream EOs—and even the United Auto Workers—contributed greatly to making this happen, without other aggressive climate protection measures these standards will be quickly outpaced by growing vehicle miles traveled. Moreover, increasing fuel economy standards does not address major equality issues connected to the U.S. transportation system—about 50% of the population do not have access to mass transit. For this half of the population, the only option is to use a personal vehicle, which absorbs a significant portion of most people's income. Real reductions in emissions from the transportation sector will come from actually reducing the amount of travel by people and goods and shifting movement toward low and zero-carbon forms of transport such as walking, biking, and public and mass transit.

62 McKibben, Bill. 2012, op. cit.

A New U.S. Environmental Movement?

In the aftermath of the federal climate bill defeat, many U.S. environmental organizations re-examined their program, strategies, and tactics. While some turned to technocratic, market-based, piecemeal, and legislative efforts at the city, state, and regional level, others maintained their focus on building grassroots support for science-based, equitable climate protection. The one front where mainstream EOs and grassroots, EJ, and other social movements have started to come together in their use of civil disobedience strategies is in the battle against the fossil fuel industry's extreme energy agenda; this includes deep sea oil and gas drilling, hydraulic fracturing, surface coal mining, tar sands oil, and more.

The "extreme energy agenda" is the culmination of several trends, and the massive profits accrued by the fossil fuels industry has allowed it to develop and use far riskier energy extraction methods to get to hard to reach fossil fuels. Meanwhile, rising global energy demands are driving a fast growing global energy trade, including the export of coal, gas, and oil from the U.S. Also, the fossil fuel industry's success in defeating a U.S. federal climate bill and delaying an international agreement on climate change means fossil fuel companies are not hampered by climate regulations. A string of energy disasters has also drawn attention to the social, environmental, climate, and economic costs of the fossil fuel economy, and given the U.S. EM impetus to fight the extreme energy agenda.

The 2010 explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig killed eleven crew members and spilled 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, off the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Despite oil and gas companies' claims that the technology for oil drilling is vastly improving, BP's Deepwater Horizon gushed oil into the Gulf of Mexico unabated for three

months. The spill was by far the largest the world has ever experienced. The immediate effects of the spill had a devastating impact on marine species, although marine scientists believe the full impact on the Gulf ecosystem may not be apparent for a decade.⁶³

Also in 2010, 29 miners were killed in a massive explosion in Massey Corporation's Upper Big Branch coal mine in Montcoal, West Virginia. The company argued that a massive release of methane gas caused the explosion, but federal investigators found that the company did not have a functioning ventilation system in the mine, allowing gas to build up dangerously. The investigation also found that, because the company did not properly maintain its emergency water system, it did not function as it should have when the explosion occurred.⁶⁴ The Upper Big Branch mine explosion added to the frustration that local communities and environmentalists feel about the decades-long impact of mountaintop removal mining in West Virginia and other southeastern states. The tops of more than 500 mountains have been blown off in the region to extract coal, forever changing the landscape and ecosystems of the region. There has been an exodus of residents from the region because of the great amount of social, health, and environmental damage done by mountaintop removal.

⁶³ The oil, coupled with the dispersants designed to break it up, will—at least in the foreseeable future—deal a serious blow to the foundation of this ecosystem: the tiny plants and animals known as phytoplankton and zooplankton," which other species in the Gulf rely on for food. According to Shirley, a prominent marine biologist at Texas A & M, "entire generations of shrimp, crab, oysters, and other commercially important marine life may be wiped out and take years to recover. Much of that devastation will remain invisible to us, as creatures from sperm whales to sea turtles may die from the effects of the oil and sink beneath the waves without a trace" (Yale 360, 06/09/10: The BP Spill's Growing Toll On the Sea Life of the Gulf).

⁶⁴ ABCNews, 05/19/11: Government Investigation Faults Massey Energy in West Virginia Mine Disaster.

Just a year after the BP spill, the largest ever inland water oil spill occurred in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Enbridge Energy Corporation's oil pipeline under the Kalamazoo River ruptured, spilling over a million gallons of oil into the river and related creeks. More than a year after the spill, residents still report that the river is slick with oil and that the health, economic, employment and environmental impacts of the spill are not being properly captured, if at all.⁶⁵ Also in 2011, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan exposed millions of humans and other species to nuclear radiation.

The extreme energy agenda is deeply disturbing, yet it seems to have acted as a catalyst for U.S. EOs to reexamine their goals, strategies, and tactics from the last decade. Moreover, it has illuminated the power and control of the fossil fuel industry and more clearly defined the EM's enemy in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation. As a result, EOs that have traditionally stuck to legislative and technocratic strategies have recognized the need to shift power relations in order to stop climate change and environmental degradation. To date, the struggle over the Keystone XL pipeline is the best example of how a wide range of EOs have joined forces and mobilized their varying memberships, resources, strategies, and tactics into a mass movement against what Bill McKibben termed a "carbon bomb" (the tar sands in Alberta, Canada). Another example is the Sierra Club's "Beyond Coal" campaign to shut down new and existing coal power plants in the U.S. I explain the case of Keystone XL and the "Beyond Coal" campaign below and briefly mention the challenge of other extreme energy types that U.S. EOs are currently facing or will soon have to confront.

⁶⁵ Skinner, Lara and Sweeney, Sean. 2012. *The Impact of Tar Sands Oil Spills on Employment and the Economy*, Cornell University, ILR School, Global Labor Institute.

(Almost) Defeating Keystone XL: Lessons Learned?

In 2010, the U.S. State Department began reviewing an application from TransCanada Corporation to build a nearly 2,000-mile pipeline from Alberta, Canada, to the Gulf of Mexico in the U.S. The pipeline would carry about 800,000 barrels of tar sands oil—one of the dirtiest fuels on the planet—every day across the largest freshwater aquifer in the U.S. TransCanada's Phase One Keystone pipeline spilled 22 times in its first year of operation, despite assurances from TransCanada that the pipeline would only spill seven times over a 50 year period.⁶⁶

Currently, the struggle continues over whether or not the Keystone XL pipeline will be built, with a broad coalition of grassroots and mainstream EOs, indigenous peoples, community groups, farmers, and a few labor unions who oppose the pipeline having scored some important victories. In November 2011, President Obama announced that he would delay a decision on the pipeline until 2013. When legislation pushed by Republicans, the oil and gas industry, and several building and construction trade unions forced the President to make a decision within 60 days, the President again held strong and denied a permit for the pipeline.

The EM's resistance to Keystone XL is exceptional for several reasons. Early on in the struggle to defeat Keystone XL, the Tar Sands Action Coalition was formed by a wide array of organizations, including: indigenous communities from Alberta who were already being impacted by the extraction of tar sands; the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), which is a global network of EJ organizations; big EOs that are normally much more focused on legal and legislative action, namely NRDC and Sierra Club; more radical EOs like 350.org; progressive community groups and associations of farmers located along the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

pipeline route through the U.S; and eventually, several unions and worker organizations. These groups joined together and carried out a very coordinated campaign to push Obama to reject the pipeline. The diversity of organizations in the Tar Sands Action Coalition created a strong social force that helped to dispel the idea that this was just an “environmental issue,” or “farmers issue,” or “workers issue.”

In addition to the many organizations involved in the Tar Sands Action campaign, a diversity of tactics was used by the campaign to stop Keystone XL, including a combination of civil disobedience and massive demonstrations at the White House (the largest since the Vietnam War protests) as well as standard tactics such as testifying at hearings, lobbying politicians, and educating the public. A lot of credit goes to Bill McKibben and 350.org (named after the scientific goal for the amount of parts per million of carbon we can have in the atmosphere) for reviving mass movement civil disobedience actions in the EM, particularly relating to climate change. U.S. environmentalists have been doing direct action and civil disobedience to stop old-growth logging, mountaintop removal coal mining, construction of nuclear plants, and more for decades. However, popular support for direct action waned in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the FBI used infiltrators and informants to bring down a circle of radical forest defenders in the Pacific Northwest. The U.S. Federal Court convicted several young activists of “eco-terrorism,” building on the anti-terrorism sentiment from 9/11, despite the fact that their actions had been aimed exclusively at property damage and did not cause any human harm.⁶⁷ Some of the activists were sentenced and are serving more than 20 years in prison for their direct action activities. However, following the massive protests against Keystone XL, which were largely led by 350.org, civil dis-

obedience actions have been taken a number of times in the last year in response to coal exports, hydrofracking, surface and mountaintop removal coal mining, and other extreme energy modes. Most of the direct actions are not aimed at completely shutting down the projects, but instead seek to raise awareness and build a movement in opposition to fossil fuel companies’ extreme energy agenda.

The message of the Keystone XL/Tar Sands Action campaign was also different than the approach taken by most environmental organizations with the federal climate bill and sub-national climate protection efforts. The clearly stated goal of the campaign was to have Obama reject the pipeline because building it would be tantamount to “a fuse to a carbon bomb” that would mean “game over” for the climate. In many mainstream EO efforts to achieve climate protection policies and plans, the importance of climate change is subordinated to messaging about “creating green jobs” or “reducing pollution.” Instead, the Tar Sands Action Coalition put climate squarely at the center of the debate around Keystone XL, clearly articulating to the American public the climate implications of the project.

The Tar Sands Action campaign was also different in how it dealt with the “jobs” issue as it related to Keystone XL. At first, the mainstream EOs in the campaign thought that they should not raise the jobs implications of Keystone XL at all, because “they could never win” on this issue. However, as TransCanada Corporation zeroed in on promoting Keystone XL as a solution to unemployment that would create “hundreds of thousands” of jobs, some of the grassroots EOs and other organizations in the coalition decided that they needed to challenge the industry’s inflated job claims. The Cornell Global Labor Institute produced an analysis of the job creation potential of Keystone XL and found that TransCanada had vastly inflated the number of jobs that would be created by construc-

⁶⁷ New York Times, 04/07/02: From Tree-Hugger to Terrorist.

tion of the pipeline. This information added to the strength of the Tar Sands Action Coalition because it clearly demonstrated that the company was not acting on behalf of the American people or American workers, but rather was looking to make billions by extracting and transporting oil to emerging economies where demand for oil is growing.

The release of this report and the decision by two unions and two worker organizations to oppose Keystone XL caused problems for the only formal labor-environmental alliance in the U.S.—the BlueGreen Alliance. The Alliance had decided not to take a position on the pipeline because it included member unions and EOs on both sides of the issue. This “lowest common denominator” dynamic buried tough questions that must be answered regarding how labor relates to key environmental and climate issues when jobs are at stake and how labor will relate to other social movements (farmers, indigenous peoples, etc.) on key environmental and climate issues. Tensions built within the alliance, and eventually three unions left out of anger at the stances of some of the EOs.

Labor-environmental alliances are key to the struggle against environmental degradation and climate change, and it is clear that both sides will need to widen their frames and raise the ambition of their efforts at social change if they are going to truly advocate for a socially just, environmentally sustainable society. To date, the BlueGreen Alliance has focused on “win-win” policies and projects that modestly link job creation and emissions reductions or environmental sustainability. However, the reality is that significant “green job” creation will only occur if there are bold, ambitious, equitable, science-based climate policies that regulate a transition to a low-carbon economy. This means that employment in high-carbon industries will eventually be phased out. But if this transition occurs under social ownership and democratic control of key sectors, social needs,

and workers’ rights will be prioritized and met. In contrast, if we create a low-carbon economy under the current political-economic system, in the manner that many EOs are advocating, current power relations will be maintained and further entrenched. This means greater inequality, and poor working and living conditions for the majority of the planet’s people.

Sierra Club’s “Beyond Coal” Campaign

Sierra Club’s “Beyond Coal” Campaign is another example of a recent U.S. environmental campaign that has utilized new tactics and strategies to achieve significant climate and environmental success. Sierra Club, along with local, grassroots, environmental, environmental justice, and public health organizations, made it a goal to stop the construction of new coal plants for health, climate and environmental reasons. To date, the campaign has stopped the construction of 150 new coal plants and retired 114 old plants.⁶⁸ Based on its success of preventing new coal plants from being built, the Beyond Coal Campaign is now targeting old, highly polluting coal plants for clean up or closure (there are currently about 500 coal plants operating in the United States).

Although it is one of the “Big Greens” in the U.S. environmental movement, the Sierra Club has built a grassroots membership of hundreds of thousands of members that it cultivates through local and state chapters. It is through these chapters, in collaboration with other types of organizations, that the Sierra Club has been able to build a highly participatory movement against coal-fired generation in the U.S. Left to legislation or regulation, however, it could take decades to phase out coal burning plants. In the near-total absence of such legislation or regulation, the Sierra Club has employed highly participatory grassroots action with great

⁶⁸ <http://beyondcoal.org>.

success to shut down or prevent the construction of coal plants. In addition to reducing emissions and toxic pollution, the Beyond Coal Campaign plays an important role in improving the living conditions of the working class and communities of color that are typically located near coal-burning plants.

By many standards, the goal of this campaign seemed unrealistically ambitious, or as we often hear in response to bold, equitable proposals, “political unfeasible.” Yet it was this ambitious, clear vision, combined with the on-the-ground negative impacts of coal plants, that allowed the Sierra Club and its community allies to take on one of the most powerful industries in the world—the fossil fuel industry—and win on many counts. The ambition, vision, strategy, and tactics of this campaign should guide future action by the U.S. EM to stop and/or slow environmental degradation and climate change.

In addition to targeting new and existing coal-burning power plants, the Sierra Club, again with grassroots community organizations, is also trying to stop the export of millions of tons of coal mined in the U.S. to foreign markets. As energy demand in the U.S. levels off, coal companies are hoping to mine coal in the U.S. and export it to emerging markets in the rest of the world. Not only are there huge climate implications from a growing coal trade, but the coal is mined in the Western U.S. using surface coal mining techniques. Like mountain top removal, these techniques have ravaged the land and have serious health and environmental consequences for the communities near the points of mining, transport, and export.

This campaign is also buttressed with grassroots organizing and the use of mass movement civil disobedience. A specific coalition aimed at halting the construction of coal export facilities has formed and is preparing to use civil disobedience to stop the U.S. from expanding its coal export trade. An excerpt from their website

explains their frustration with legislative, technocratic, top-down approaches to fighting fossil fuels, and why they will be using grassroots civil disobedience:

We don't take this step lightly. The fact is, tactics like lobbying, petitioning, and packing public hearings have unfortunately not halted plans to develop Otter Creek for coal export. We need to increase public pressure in a new way. The Tar Sands Action showed us what can happen when people come together. King Coal might have money, but real power is collective and comes from the people. Please join us this summer, as we re-claim our future from the coal industry. You can sign up to make history here.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, natural gas has been championed by some international energy agencies, gas companies and even mainstream EOs as a bridge from fossil fuels to renewables. In an effort to combat declining production from traditional natural gas wells, companies have introduced an extraction method known as “hydraulic fracturing” to release natural gas from shale rock regions. Hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, is a process in which thousands of gallons of chemically treated water are injected into shale rock formations one to two miles deep at high pressure to release pockets of natural gas. While most grassroots EJ and CJ organizations are calling for a complete ban on fracking, many mainstream EOs are only now coming to terms with the reality that natural gas may not be an ideal “bridge fuel” to a renewables-based energy system. Not only has the process contaminated fresh water supplies in the areas where drilling is performed, but several studies have shown that the methane released cancels out the emissions saved at the burn point compared to coal.⁷⁰ Local chapters of big EOs like Sierra Club and NRDC have taken positions against fracking, but the national organizations are still only calling for regulation to ensure that it is done safely.

⁶⁹ <http://coalexportaction.org>.

⁷⁰ New York Times Online, 04/18/11: Cornell Gas Study Stirs Heated Debate.

Conclusion

The international social movement for change—which refers to itself as ‘the irresistible rise of global anti-capitalism’—is stronger than many may imagine and will grow stronger.

James Gustave Speth

The mainstream still dominates the U.S. environmental movement in terms of membership numbers, visibility, and resources. The mainstream’s agenda is primarily to maintain the current capitalist political-economic system, including its patterns of production and consumption and undemocratic control over economic decision-making. In pursuit of this goal, the mainstream employs top-down, technocratic, and piecemeal approaches to the environmental crisis that rely on staff with specific legal, legislative, and scientific expertise. This approach alienates the vast majority of people, who are excluded from accessing and influencing the current political, social, and judicial system, and reinforces the claim that the environmental movement is a white, middle, and upper class movement. In short, it does not inspire widespread engagement or participation around a broad vision for social change that could help to build a social movement with real power.

The limitations of the mainstream EM’s approach, and the power of the opposition, are visible in the state of the environment, both in the U.S. and globally. The intensity of environmental degradation and the climate crisis continues to accelerate, and many wonder whether we have already passed critical, irreversible tipping points in our disruption and destruction of the world’s ecosystem. Mainstream organizations are trying to make small, incremental changes within the existing political-economic system, setting their sights on what is “politically feasible” given the current political (Democratic or Republican) leadership. With more

transformative and structural changes to the current political-economic system regarded as “off-limits,” mainstream EOs have been pushed into rearguard action since the 1980s; in other words, defending regulatory and legislative gains from the 1960s and 1970s.

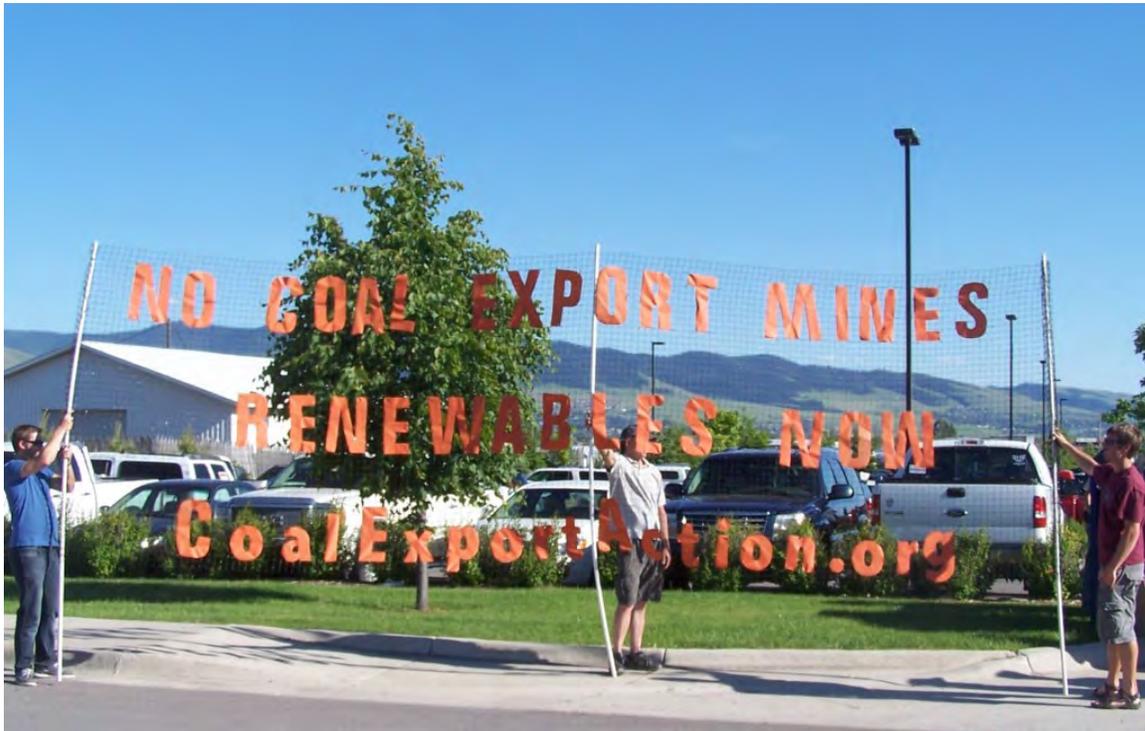
Real action to address the climate and environmental crises will not come from the mainstream, at least not in its current form. To truly address these crises requires a fundamental restructuring of the current political-economic system to address fundamental social and environmental needs. Ultimately, creating a low-carbon, environmentally sustainable and socially just society will require democratic control and social ownership of key sectors and modes of production and consumption. Presently, the mainstream environmental movement is wed to the Democratic Party (and the two-party system) and corporate and other private funders, preventing it from challenging the current balance of power.⁷¹

Hope for real social change in this regard comes from the environmental justice and climate justice wing of the EM and the many “radical, essentially anti-capitalist, strategies” that are emerging around the world, “based on other ethics and forms of organization, rather than the profit motive.”⁷² Since the beginning of its formation in the 1980s and 1990s, the predominantly female, people of color, and working class base of the EJM has explained environmental degradation and social ills like joblessness and growing inequality as rooted in the same political-economic system that degrades people and the planet. Rather than defining issues like “climate change” and “pollution” as “environmental” problems,

71 The Daily Caller, 09/06/12: Climate change so serious Democrats mention it once in over 80 speeches over two days.

72 Foster, John Bellamy. 2011, op. cit.

Graphic 3. An Action Against the Growing U.S. Coal Export Trade.



Source: <http://coalexportaction.org/page/2>.

the EJ and CJ movements have correctly identified them as social problems that are caused by the capitalist organization of political-economic relations. Indeed, these problems will be solved by challenging the power of the capitalist system and demanding that our political-economic system be based on economic democracy, social solidarity, and environmental sustainability. Led by groups that are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, U.S. EJ organizations have employed highly participatory, grassroots, direct action strategies to fight for environmental justice.

Until recently, however, the EJM in the U.S. has largely operated as a politically reactive movement that is fighting environmental ills in specific communities, rather than as a nationally or internationally linked movement proactively

offering its own solutions to the environmental, climate and social crises. A broader, better coordinated, more powerful movement capable of challenging the current power structure and advancing an alternative to the current political-economic system has not yet fully emerged. But the EJM in the U.S. has laid the building blocks for transformative change by addressing specific, community-based problems with an orientation toward the structural causes of these problems. In other words, many EJ organizations in the U.S. have been building a solid base for social change over the last few decades by educating and mobilizing their members about the need for an alternative to the current neoliberal capitalist system. The next step is translating this local power into state, national and international power. In many ways this step has already begun being taken.

In recent years an important trend has been emerging, with many EJ organizations, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, beginning to tackle climate change and build a global movement for climate justice. Along with a number of other social movements—including indigenous peoples, small farmers, the global grassroots movement against global capitalism (Seattle WTO 1999), women’s movements, some left trade unions, and others—the CJM has articulated a very clear and coherent message that “tweaking” capitalism is not going to solve the climate crisis. The CJM has used climate change as a mobilizing issue to demand broader structural change that addresses the climate crisis as well as the economic and social crises that we currently face.

The basis for a massive social movement capable of shifting power relations is clearly visible in the CJM. The environmental and climate justice movements’ orientation toward confrontational, direct action and participatory struggle has even influenced some mainstream EOs. This is demonstrated by environmental, climate justice, and other grassroots organizations working alongside some mainstream EOs to fight the extreme energy agenda, for example via Keystone XL, “Beyond Coal,” and the U.S.’s growing coal export trade. Still, how do we take environmental and climate justice organizations’ successes at the local level and amplify them in a way that their scale, scope, and timeframe adequately address climate change? And how does the meta-narrative of “system change, not climate change,” so coherently articulated by the CJM, translate to real power that the movement can use to carry out its vision for a socially just, environmentally sustainable society?

Building power to challenge and upend the current socio-economic system in the U.S. is a multi-fold process that involves leveraging short-term wins such as Keystone XL into bigger victories in the future. Short-term wins generate energy

among participants, show allies and opponents that power is real, motivate newcomers, build trust among individuals and organizations, and raise the ceiling on what is possible. In the U.S. a few new fronts have opened up, offering opportunities for broader movement building aimed at more fundamental structural change to address the environmental and climate crises. For example, just in the last several months, 350.org has turned its attention to what it calls “public enemy #1”: the fossil fuel companies. This organization’s combination of a confrontational style, recognition of power relations in society, and principled stand on climate protection, opens up a significant opportunity for grassroots EOs to join forces with the climate and environmental justice movement. Similarly, a couple of the left “Big Greens” like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, who have large memberships in both the Global North and South, are also calling for system change. These core allies to the CJ and EJ movements have an essential role to play in building towards bolder and more sweeping change.

Building a broader, better coordinated, and ultimately more powerful movement that believes the current political-economic system cannot address the environmental or climate crises is essential to obtaining the structural, transformative change we need. Like the EJM and CJM, this bigger movement must be grounded in principles of economic democracy, social solidarity and collective action. Dedication to these principles will help the movement use strategies and tactics that fall outside typical institutional channels to fight projects and proposals that undermine genuine environmental sustainability, social growth, and equality. More importantly, this is about building a movement that sees the confluence of environmental, social, and economic crises as a mandate to proclaim that the current system is not working for the planet or for the 99%. Accordingly, power must be built and exercised in order to prioritize social and environmental needs. In the U.S., environ-

mental and climate justice organizations—al-
lied with left trade unions, radical grassroots
environmental organizations, left environmen-
tal organizations, and other social justice move-
ments—present the best opportunity for broad

citizen participation and collective action. This
collaborative movement has the power to truly
address the environmental and climate crises,
leading to a socially just and environmentally
sustainable society.

Related Resources

Beautiful Green World: On the Myths of a Green Economy

By Ulrich Brand, June 2012

Energy Emergency, Energy Transition: Workshop on Climate Change and Trade Union Strategies - October 10-12, 2012

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