

Chapter Five

Strategy Issues: The Clean Energy Revolution and World-Changing

It was about five years ago. I was talking with a friend about my then-recent personal decision to prioritize work on the climate crisis. I had done so after the European heat wave in the summer of 2003 that led to 30,000 or more deaths. This catastrophe jolted me into serious study about the issue of global warming, study which led me to conclude that the dangerous, earth-heating-up process was happening much more quickly than I had thought it was.

My friend didn't disagree about the urgency of the climate crisis, but his view was that what we needed to do about it was to build a stronger movement to replace capitalism with a 21st century version of socialism. I didn't agree. I felt that we didn't have the many, many years that it would take to build the kind of powerful mass movement that would be necessary to bring about full-scale economic and political transformation (whatever it was called), especially given the weaknesses and disorientation of the political Left. I felt that the immediate historical need was to do all we could to get off of fossil fuels and onto a renewable energy/energy conservation path. I was convinced that this clean energy movement, to be successful within the limited time period we have, would need to include a very broad range of people, people like Al Gore, for example, not exactly a revolutionary.

For many years previous to this, going back to 1975, I had been an active and often leading member of organizations which were either "third parties," especially the Green Party, or which were trying to build towards one. I believed that the formation and building of a progressive political alternative to the Democratic and Republican parties was strategically necessary if we were to transform the United States in positive ways.

To me, this was almost like a motherhood and apple pie belief. I had matured during the 1960's when Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, was President, and the Vietnam War had escalated tremendously under his leadership. As I reached the draft age of 18, I studied the history of that war and came to realize that the United States had allied itself with brutally repressive governments in the southern part of Vietnam ("South Vietnam") for about 20 years. Indeed, without U.S. support those governments would not have been able to exist. And in support of them, the Democratic Party-led government from 1961-1969 was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people a day in that part of the world. And then there were the Southern Democrats who were not just supporters but active proponents of racist segregation.

By the first years of this new century, I had been active within the progressive third party movement for close to three decades. One of my personal high points was a Green Party campaign for the United States Senate in New Jersey in 2002. It was a good campaign. Although I ended up receiving only a little over 1% of the vote, 25,000 in total, the campaign invigorated the New Jersey Green Party such that, in the following year, we ran 49 candidates for various local and state offices, and our overall vote total doubled, from 2 ½% of the vote to 5%, compared to a comparable election cycle four years previously.

One of the major issues of my 2002 campaign was global warming. In my campaign literature and in my speeches I talked about the need to get off of Middle East oil—a concrete way to decrease our risk of another Al Qaeda attack—and to shift to renewable energy sources like the wind and the sun. I discovered that this was a very popular set of beliefs; I encountered literally no one who challenged them.

So when the European heat wave of 2003 happened, I was primed to appreciate its significance and responded accordingly. By the end of the year I was reorienting my personal priorities to make more time to work on the climate issue, and by the end of 2004 I had transitioned out of my decade-long job as national coordinator of the Independent Progressive Politics Network so that I could really concentrate on climate work full time.

For the next four years, under the second Bush/Cheney regime, I did what I could to build a strong, grassroots-based climate movement. In early 2004 I worked with Fr. Paul Mayer to found the Climate Crisis Coalition. In the spring of 2006 I was offered and took a job with the Chesapeake Climate Action Network as the coordinator of their national work, a job that I continue to have. In 2008 I was encouraged to see the issue of climate change, energy policy and green jobs emerge as one of the major issues of the Presidential campaign. I was pleased to watch Barack Obama call for the establishment of a government program in which major carbon polluters would need to buy a permit to emit greenhouse gases and in which all of those permits would be auctioned, with the proceeds from it being returned to consumers as well as being used for clean energy and green jobs investments.

Although I voted for Green Party candidate Cynthia McKinney, I was glad Obama won, and I was very encouraged when Henry Waxman defeated the auto industry-friendly John Dingell for the chairmanship of the powerful House Energy and Commerce committee where, I knew, federal climate legislation would be drafted. I was hopeful as that process began in late 2008 and into early 2009.

In late March, however, when Waxman's draft of "The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009," ACESA, was made public, I found myself being reminded why I had worked for so long to build a progressive third party. These feelings only deepened over the next three months leading up to the passage in late June of a final piece of ACESA legislation. It was even worse than the late-March draft as it was carved up by the coal interests which are so strong within the Democratic Party.

It's a similar thing with our "yes we can" President. All through his campaign for the Presidency he called for a 100% auction of permits to emit carbon, and he then included this plan in proposed 2010 budget authority legislation in late February of 2009. But when he couldn't get a majority of U.S. Senators to support that part of his budget authority proposal, and after Waxman came out in late March with his ACESA bill draft, Obama went silent. Like Waxman, he allowed the powerful fossil fuel interests which continue to dominate Capitol Hill to wreak their carnage.

What might have made a difference? Things might have been different if there had been a much

stronger, more massive radical wing of the climate movement (“radical” as in getting to the root of the problem) to visibly push back against the fossil fuel Democrats and the environmentalists who quietly went along with them. If there were demonstrations of thousands around the country, or a massive sit-in on Capitol Hill, this might have had an impact. Instead, most environmental and climate groups used their usual tactics, doing some lobbying to try to strengthen ACESA but engaging in virtually no "street heat."

Where was the U.S. Left during this battle for strong federal climate legislation? It was around, here and there, individuals writing articles, some groups putting out statements, but by and large independent progressives who understand that corporate capitalism is our underlying problem were largely missing in action.

Why This Issue Is So Critical, Short- and Long-Term

There are a number of reasons why this issue needs to be one that people who consider themselves part of the progressive movement should be studying about and taking action on.

The most important one is the reality of the climate science. There is no question that the burning of fossil fuels, the destruction of forests and the general disregard for our ecosystem manifested by industrial capitalism, as well as 20th century efforts to build socialism in the Soviet Union and China, have led us close to the edge of a cascading series of ecological disasters that are a grave threat to the future of life on earth as we have known it for thousands of years. Stronger and more destructive hurricanes and typhoons, spreading desertification, more intensive and extensive heat waves, chronic and numerically increasing wildfires, rising sea levels, 100-year-floods happening every decade or less, the disruption of agriculture, growing water scarcity—all of this is happening now, and it's going to get worse. The question is whether we as a human species, worldwide, are going to be able to gather the spiritual and political strength in enough time to make a rapid shift away from our past polluting practices. We must, we absolutely have to do this to prevent the acceleration of global warming which, sooner or later, will lead us past critical climate tipping points, as spelled out in the first chapter.

Any independent progressive movement which doesn't do all that it can to prevent this worldwide catastrophe is a complete and total contradiction in terms.

The climate crisis is also a fundamental justice issue. Who is it that is being hit first and hardest as the world begins to experience the negative impacts of a hotter world? It is the people who did the least to cause it, low-income people and people of color. It is Black people in the 9th Ward in New Orleans who lived in the neighborhoods least protected from a strong hurricane. It is Indigenous people in the Arctic where the ice and permafrost are melting, villages are collapsing into the ever-rising ocean waters and hunters are experiencing an unstable and weakening ice. It is residents of islands in the South Pacific where rising seas are threatening to displace entire nations from their historic homelands going back thousands of years.

Those with the least resources are those with the fewest options as climate impacts affect

people's livelihoods and living situations.

The politics of this dynamic is currently playing itself out as the nations of the world struggle to come up with a stronger international climate treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol, expiring in three years. For two years an effort was made to come up with a treaty by December, 2009 at a major United Nations climate conference in Copenhagen. Yet at that conference it was made clear that there are significant differences between the Group of 77 and China, the formerly colonized countries of the global South, and most of the industrialized countries of the North, with a few European exceptions. The global South is demanding significant cuts in ghg emissions by the industrialized North, at least 40% below the baseline year levels of 1990 by 2020. They are demanding this since over 80% of the ghg emissions in the atmosphere affecting all the nations of the world are the result of the North's economic development over the past 150 or so years. Yet the United States, responsible for over a quarter of those historic emissions, is proposing via the ACESA legislation to reduce U.S.-based emissions no more than 4-5% by 2020.

Those who recognize the deep-seated inequality and injustice of the world economic order, growing out of centuries of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism by the coal- and oil-burning capitalist powers, have a responsibility to support the call for a truly just treaty. Only such a treaty can begin to restore the necessary trust internationally that would then make possible rapid leaps forward to renewable energy-based, sustainable and, sooner or later, fair economic development throughout the world.

There is a growing and interconnected, international grassroots climate movement that just organized over 5,200 local actions in 181 countries all around the world on October 24th, 2009, leading up to the Copenhagen conference (www.350.org). There were tens of thousands of people who demonstrated on December 12th in Copenhagen and thousands of actions on the same day around the world. This international movement has been steadily developing since 2005. It is a hopeful development and a concrete indicator of the potential for the climate issue to galvanize and advance an independent progressive movement that puts climate justice issues at its center.

Another reason why those who want to see fundamental change for the better should be doing consistent work on this issue is because major changes in society only happen when a large percentage of its members support such change.

Everyone is affected by global heating. Some are affected more by it and are suffering and will suffer earlier and more seriously, but this is an issue that ultimately affects us all. People are experiencing the changes in weather patterns in their daily life. Two-thirds of U.S. Americans believe that we need to shift away from the use of fossil fuels.

You can be sure that Barack Obama and John McCain would not have made this a major issue in

their 2008 campaigns for the Presidency if it wasn't one that their polls showed had resonance among the broad voting public.

We have a significant opportunity to build the kind of mass-based movement that, sooner or later, can force the kinds of changes needed in the way the U.S. creates its energy. As we are seeing right now with what is happening on Capitol Hill, there is a need for people who understand the ways in which corporate power operates. We need people who can help the climate movement avoid the trap of blindly following Democrats who say one thing but, once in power, are then willing to settle for something very different. In this process progressive independents can build a stronger base of support and a more activist movement able to increasingly challenge corporate power and those subservient to it.

Helping people to understand the way in which power works, helping them to develop the tactics and the organizational strength to overcome it on particular issues—this is a key task for an independent progressive movement. In the process of doing this work we will be laying the basis for broadly-supported revolutionary changes in our energy policy, as well as in other areas of society.

On a very practical level, renewable energy technology can be used on local levels to provide "power to the people," not just the power of the sun or the wind but power to build local economies that are more self-sufficient. Think about a local neighborhood which joins together to install rooftop solar panels and/or several windmills which, in combination, provide most or all of the electricity needed by that neighborhood. Organizing a neighborhood to do this is, first, a way to bring people together around a commonly-shared need—affordable and reliable electricity. The process of community organizing around a commonly shared need can develop confidence and hope within the community that will then likely manifest itself in other positive projects and initiatives. It will give people a sense of their power when they join together with others.

This kind of a process is the essence of what is needed to build a popular movement capable of making positive social change.

Finally, but very importantly, the process of building a clean energy revolution will organically lead growing numbers of people toward a deeply-felt appreciation for and connection to our natural environment. This is something needed not just by the general population but by too many of those who call themselves radicals. It is needed because the negative values of domination and greed which undergird capitalism and the destructive corporate practices which flow from them are responsible for tremendous environmental damage and pollution. The development of an ecological consciousness and a will to act on it on the part of ever-larger numbers of people is an absolute prerequisite if we are to have any hope for developing the kind of future new society which sees itself as one with nature, not its master.

On an individual level, appreciating, connecting to and learning from the natural world is an

essential aspect of how new women and new men can emerge who are able to give leadership within a 21st century revolutionary process.

There are many things that make good revolutionaries: an ability to listen, a sensitivity to human suffering, an understanding of history and economics, basic organizing skills, a commitment to development of new leadership, self-motivated discipline, a willingness to sacrifice for others. Many of these qualities are enhanced by a personal connection to the many other life forms with whom we share this planet Earth.

Strategy for the Climate Movement

Given the absolute necessity for the broadly-based climate movement to succeed soon in its efforts to turn around U.S., and world, energy policy, what are the aspects of a strategy for that movement that hold hope of being successful?

Some of them are already well in place and being enacted.

No New Coal Movement: One of the strengths of the existing climate movement is the “no new coal” component of it. For several years groups all around the country, supported by some of the national environmental groups, particularly the Sierra Club, have been hard at work on a local level to try to prevent new coal plants from being built, and they have been successful. A 2005 energy bill pushed by Bush and Cheney projected the building of 150 new coal plants around the country. Since that time 100 of these projected coal plants have been defeated because of grassroots organizing or for other reasons. There is an increasing focus by this loosely-connected but very real people’s movement on not just proposed new coal plants but the strict regulation or shutting down of particularly dirty and polluting, old coal plants.

An indication of this particular movement’s growing strength was a mass civil disobedience action that took place on March 2nd, 2009 in Washington, D.C. On that date thousands of people took part in a demonstration on a work day, Monday, against a 100 year old coal-fired plant on Capitol Hill that provides some of the power to Congressional buildings. This was a day whose high temperature was in the 20’s and on which about half a foot of snow was on the ground, but that didn’t prevent people’s spirited participation in an all-afternoon blockade of all of the entrances to the plant. Nothing went in, and nothing came out. And because of the action’s breadth of involvement and unwavering commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience to press our demands, the Congressional leadership announced just before the action that they were moving to eliminate the use of coal as an energy source for the plant and to shift to still-polluting but cleaner natural gas.

A key component of this action was the involvement of a sizeable delegation of people from Appalachia where coal has been king for a long time. That is changing, though not easily. It will be essential, if the no coal movement is to succeed, that the overall climate movement support legislation and programs to develop clean energy and energy efficiency jobs programs in existing coal regions to provide alternative means of employment for displaced coal miners. This is key

strategic work.

Federal Legislation: Another absolutely essential objective is the passage of federal legislation that puts a price on the burning of fossil fuels, a steadily more expensive price, and that therefore drives a rapid shift to renewables, conservation and efficiency.

As I am writing there is a major focus by environmental and climate groups on trying to get the U.S. Senate to pass legislation that is better than the problematic legislation passed at the end of June in the House of Representatives. Virtually all of these groups would like to see a bill that ratchets up the price on burning carbon and other greenhouse gases. But far too many of them, especially some of the more established and well-endowed enviro groups, are letting the pretty abysmal political science of Capitol Hill, rather than the climate science, guide their actions. As a result, there is a strong tendency to align with the existing Democratic Party leadership and support whatever they believe is politically possible rather than the organization of independent and visible grassroots mobilization, and independent policy development.

Concretely, this manifests itself in widespread support among many established groups for a strategy of lobbying—not popular mobilization—and support of a “cap and trade” framework for a federal climate bill.

Under “cap and trade,” key parts of which are central to the Kyoto Protocol (the international climate treaty), greenhouse gas (ghg) polluting companies need to buy pollution permits each year from the government, one permit for each ton of ghg’s emitted. An overall cap is set on how much pollution is allowed each year, and the cap keeps coming down. Permits are either auctioned off or are given free to carbon polluters. Once companies get those permits, they have four basic options:

- They can cut back on their ghg emissions so that they don’t need any more permits for that particular year, and they can keep doing this year after year, buying or receiving free permits as the overall cap keeps getting reduced.

- They can use “offsets” to replace the reductions in pollution required by the cap. An “offset” is an investment of money—almost always less money than would need to be invested in actual emissions reductions at the source of them—in a supposed clean energy or energy efficiency project somewhere else in the world that, also supposedly, is reducing ghg emissions. The problem is that studies have shown that as many as 2/3rds of these offset projects either would have happened anyway, or they don’t do what they say they will do as far as reducing emissions. And they are very difficult to verify.

- They can cut their ghg emissions deeper than they are required to. Then they can sell on a “carbon market”—think Wall Street or commodities futures markets—the excess permits they have been given free or bought at auction to either another company which went over its allotted quota of ghg pollution or an investor or speculator who is trying to make money via the carbon market.

-They can go over their cap but spend money on the carbon market buying additional permits so they are in compliance.

There are lots of problems with this system, some of which are alluded to above. One is when permits are given away for free. Why should companies which have been polluting our air and water for decades be given free permits to keep doing the same thing? They shouldn't, but the political science of the House of Representatives led to fully 85% of all of the permits in the Waxman-Markey bill passed at the end of June, 2009 being given away free for a period of 15-20 years, most of them to these historic polluters.

Another major problem is the offsets. There is no way that all of them can be verified as actually doing what they claim to be doing as far as ghg reductions, first of all. Some of the offsets involve negative social and environmental costs, as in the tearing down of forests in Asia to plant palm plantations for development of palm oil to be used as a bio-fuel, displacing the homes and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples in the process. And offsets let companies off the hook from making actual reductions in their fossil fuel use; analyses have shown that if all of the offsets in the Waxman-Markey bill are used, there could be little or no actual reductions of emissions at the points of pollution by U.S. companies until the mid-twenties.

The final major problem is that it is a system prone to gaming, profit-taking and speculation by unscrupulous investment companies and bankers, because the carbon market is open to anybody to take part in it. Complex financial instruments similar to the derivatives, mortgage-backed securities and credit default swaps which almost destroyed the U.S. economy will almost certainly emerge as this carbon market takes shape, not something to be desired.

Fortunately, there are many hundreds of local, state, regional and national climate, environmental, consumer, social justice and other groups which do not support "cap and trade." They support either what is called a "cap and dividend" system or a "carbon tax/fee and dividend" system.

Under both systems a price is put on the emitting of greenhouse gas emissions, or just on carbon dioxide, the major greenhouse gas. Under a carbon tax it's just that, a tax, or a fee, one which goes progressively higher over time to make sure that, in the process, there is less and less burning of coal, oil and natural gas. Under a cap and dividend system, a steadily-declining cap is enacted, 100% of the permits to emit carbon are auctioned to polluters and there are no offsets allowed.

The "dividend" part of the equation—also called "cash back"—refers to the return to the American people of all or most of the money raised, divided up equally, via a regular check or wire transfer to a person's bank account. The prices of electricity, gasoline, heating oil, natural gas or anything with carbon in it would go up because of the tax/fee or auction of permits during a transition period as we shift from carbon fuels to renewables and efficiency. But the dividend or "cash back" would make up for or be higher than those additional costs for a large majority of

U.S. Americans. And for everyone, those higher prices on items that include fossil fuels would encourage individual and family decisions to “go green” as far as appliances, lightbulbs, home insulation, cars (or use of alternatives to them), etc. to save money.

There are influential proponents of carbon tax and cap and dividend solutions to the climate crisis, among them scientist James Hansen, Congressman Chris Van Hollen, head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Congressman John Larsen, head of the House Democratic Caucus, Bill McKibben, Senators Maria Cantwell and Susan Collins, the editors of the Washington Post and many more. These are realistic proposals that, when compared with Waxman-Markey and a likely version of it that will be even worse in the U.S. Senate, compare very favorably.

Hopefully, as the stark reality of a likely worse-than-ACESA Senate cap-and-trade bill begins to become clear, first individual leaders of the established green groups and then the organizations themselves will come out publicly for these much more effective and greener options.

Popular Mobilization: Think of the great social movements of the last hundred years. Whether it be the women’s movement of the first part of the century and then the last third of it, the labor movement of the 1930’s and 1940’s, the civil rights movement of the 50’s and 60’s, the peace movement to stop the Vietnam war of the 60’s and early 70’s, the lesbian and gay rights movement of the 80’s and 90’s or the movement of this decade to end the Iraq war—all of them, some to a greater degree, placed a priority on the organization of mass demonstrations bringing out hundreds of thousands of people and/or nonviolent direct action.

For the climate movement of this first decade of the 21st century, the largest number of people at any one demonstration in the United States has been about 5,000. This happened in Salt Lake City, Utah during “Step It Up” day in the spring of 2007, and it happened again during the March 2nd, 2009 action at the Capitol Coal Plant in Washington, D.C.

What the activist wing of the climate movement has pioneered, however, is a new form of “distributed” actions, local actions in hundreds or thousands of communities on the same date, linked together by the internet and a sophisticated and user-friendly web site. Step It Up, in particular, a loose network held together by Bill McKibben and former students at Middlebury College, organized on April 14th, 2007 1400 local actions in all 50 states. There were approximately 150,000 people taking part in this day of action. Step It Up evolved into the 350.org international network which organized the local actions all around the world on October 24th, 2009.

I put a lot of time and energy into a successful action in Washington, D.C. on that day. Part of my work, for months leading up to October 24th, was outreach to environmental groups with offices in Washington, D.C. to enlist their participation in and support for the organizing of this action. And the truth is that it sometimes felt like pulling teeth for many, though not all, of them. They had plenty of time and energy to have meetings with members of the U.S. Senate or their staffs to urge them to work for a decent piece of climate legislation, but too many of them

seemed to have little time for visible mass mobilization. They didn't understand that, just as the right-wing tea bagger movement shook things up politically in the summer of 2009 via their mobilization campaign ending with a rally of 70,000 or so at the U.S. Capitol in early September, so must the climate movement visibly demonstrate its power on the streets.

The likelihood of getting truly strong, science-based federal legislation--not a quarter-loaf political compromise that could set the movement back by seeming to be a solution when it is not--will almost certainly be determined by the extent to which large numbers of people take visible action to demand it.

Nonviolent civil disobedience (NVCD) is growing within the climate movement, particularly directed at the coal industry. According to the website sourcewatch.org, the number of anti-coal actions has gone from eight in 2007 to at least 50 in 2009, and the number of people arrested from 33 to about 300.

NVCD is an essential tactic to underline the urgency of the crisis and the need for stronger and more visible forms of action by larger and larger numbers of people.

Grassroots Organizing: These popular mobilizations and civil disobedience actions must be connected, however, to grassroots organizations on college campuses and in communities. Without these forms of organization through which local people can become involved, learn more about the issues and grow in their ability to give leadership themselves to others, our popular mobilizations will be small, and our more edgy direct actions will have much less of an impact.

Over the past several years there has been a mushrooming of local organizations focused either exclusively or primarily on the climate crisis. This includes groups like the one I work for, the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, which since 2002 has been doing this work, to local chapters of established green groups like the Sierra Club. It includes affiliates of the U.S. Climate Action Network, community organizations fighting mountaintop removal or planned coal plants, campus groups related to the Energy Action Coalition or groups which were part of Step It Up in 2007 and/or the October 24th 350.org day of action. My educated guess is that there are a minimum of several thousand such groups.

From my experience there's a fairly high level of organizing skills within this loosely-connected network, and, to its credit, a good deal of on-going leadership training that takes place. While there is a recognition of the urgency of the climate crisis, there is also an understanding that the shift away from fossil fuels will take years and that we need to develop people's willingness to stay active for years accordingly.

As is true of much of the progressive movement, there are very real weaknesses within this network when it comes to understanding the interconnections between the climate crisis and issues of peace and justice and the need to be making those connections openly. One significant

exception, as far as national groups, is the Energy Action Coalition, which has made anti-oppression training a core aspect of their work. As a result, within the youth student movement there is more diversity, a more multi-racial constituency and a deeper appreciation for these issues than among many of the older groups.

One model of a more developed form of local organizing is what is happening in Oakland, Ca. There, as a result of an initiative taken by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, a coalition of about 35 local organizations was formed this spring. Named the Oakland Climate Action Coalition, it includes enviro groups, green businesses, labor unions, community-based groups and other environmental justice and pro-sustainability and green jobs organizations.

What draws them together, in the words of the Ella Baker Center's Emily Kirsch, is "the goal of a just and equitable energy and climate plan for the city. Whether you are a green enterprise looking to grow; whether you are a labor union looking out for your members; an environmental group or a community organizer who sees the effects of poverty amidst your constituents, all us have a stake in making sure that this Energy and Climate Action Plan is done right for the city of Oakland." (3)

Strong local movements and organizations are essential not just to organize and mobilize the political pressure needed for the United States to give the leadership the world desperately needs from us. It is also necessary to prepare, to move towards, a new clean energy economy which shifts power, both electrical power and people power, away from centralized energy corporations and an often-unresponsive federal government to local levels.

As Ross Gelbspan has written, "The coming changes clearly suggest that, to the extent possible, we should be eating locally and regionally grown food. We should be preparing to take our energy from a decentralized system using whichever non-carbon energy technologies are best suited to their natural surroundings—solar in sunny areas, offshore wave and tidal power in coastal areas, wind farms in the world's wind corridors, and geothermal almost everywhere."

Gelbspan also appreciates the importance of this local work "during an ear of profound natural upheaval. The key to our survival lies in an enhanced sense of community. If we maintain the fiction that we can thrive as isolated individuals, we will find ourselves at the same emotional dead end as the current crop of survivalists: an existence marked by defensiveness, mistrust, suspicion and fear." (4)

Climate Change and Social Change

A successful campaign to get the U.S. and the rest of the world onto an increasingly-more-rapid clean energy path—a clean energy revolution—will only happen if there is a deep and broad mobilization of the popular will for climate justice and social justice. It will only happen if connections are made between the addressing of the climate crisis and the addressing of the structural injustice that keeps the vast majority of the world's people in poverty or on the edge of it.

Why is this necessary? We are seeing the answer in the negotiations leading up to and what happened at the international climate conference in Copenhagen in December. The fundamental issue separating the industrialized countries of the Global North and the underdeveloped and developing countries of the formerly colonized Global South is the issue of the “climate debt.” The “debt” is the responsibility industrialized countries of the North have toward the Global South. Their burning of fossil fuels and environmentally destructive actions have brought us to our current desperate situation which is affecting and will affect the peoples of the Global South the most, the ones who have done the least to cause it.

We must build a stronger, justice-oriented, independent progressive movement at the same time as we build a stronger climate justice movement. And we must be clear that both interrelated processes involve conscious alliance-building work across lines of culture, color, nationality, gender, age, identity and other differences. We must build a broadly-based popular alliance.

It is essential that we get this. Those transnational corporations who rule over us have tremendous power, and we can't forget that five of the top ten richest corporations in the world are oil companies. Corporations own and run the TV networks, almost all national radio networks and most of the mass media. Although these media institutions are not monolithic—there is a difference between NPR and Fox News—their dominant role, particularly when it comes to TV, is to propagate a view of the world which is at best escapist, at worst disempowering and alienating. These huge businesses control much of the U.S. Congress and heavily influence whoever is in the White House. They work closely with the Pentagon. Their leaders are on the boards of major universities.

We won't overcome their power and build a much more just, much more democratic, much more healthy society unless tens of millions of people are with us.

Popular Alliance Constituencies: What are the constituencies whose involvement is critical to the success of this popular alliance?

Obviously the environmental and climate movements will be a central part of it.

Young people, whose future is very much in doubt in a world of potentially catastrophic climate change on top of institutional injustice, war and preparations for it, must be present in significant numbers in an alliance movement. And many young people are in motion and active, around a number of issues but in particular around climate/green issues.

People of color, black, brown, red and yellow, are an absolutely essential component, including in the alliance leadership. Down through history, when African American people, in particular, have gotten into political motion on a mass scale, the results have been historic. Agitation and direct action against slavery in the first half of the 19th century led to the Civil War and the legal end of chattel slavery. Reconstruction governments in the South after the Civil War, in which newly-elected blacks led successful efforts to enact reforms that benefited not just newly-freed

slaves but poor whites as well, were the precursor to the mass, multi-racial populist movement of the late 1800's. The black nationalist Marcus Garvey movement of the 1920's impacted upon the multi-racial, CIO-led, mass labor upsurge of the 30's. The civil rights movements of the 50's and 60's had direct and indirect connections to the emergence of a whole variety of movements following and interrelating with it. And finally, the black-led Rainbow Coalition movement of the 80's helped to generate the political energy for the development of several major national third party groups in the 90's, the Green Party, the Labor Party and the New Party.

Organized working people, whether through workplace-based unions or in community-based organizations, are another key component of the alliance. They have much to gain from a transition to a jobs-creating and community-building clean energy revolution, and they have much to gain from fundamental social change that leads to a more just and fair sharing of the resources of society. And the emergence and development of a popular alliance can play a leavening role within the ranks of organized labor, strengthening the more democratic and activist unions and encouraging the growth of that kind of unionism more broadly within society.

The women's movement that has emerged over the last 40 years and impacted society in myriad ways is clearly a key constituency. In addition to the issues that are specific to women—equal pay for work of comparable worth, reproductive rights, campaigns against rape and wife abuse, proportional representation in leadership, others—women bring to a larger progressive movement crucial insights about process. They can help develop a way of working that is more cooperative, that connects stated objectives to a way of working and relating to one another which lives up to those objectives. This is essential if we are to ever build a permanent alliance capable of contesting for political power and transforming society.

There are other sectors of society which must be “at the table:”

-Family farmers, who have become a very small percentage of the U.S. population but whose knowledge and experiences will become increasingly important as climate change makes the growing of food more difficult. It is virtually certain that growing numbers of people will need to take up farming as part of a coping strategy as stronger droughts, floods and storms become the norm.

-Seniors are numerically one of the largest groups within U.S. society. Their insights and wisdom can help an alliance avoid mistakes, and their specific issues—health care, social security, pension rights, others—are by no means settled.

-The gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender movement is one of the most recent of the new social movements to emerge over the past half-century, although semi-underground gay and lesbian groups go back much further. This movement demands that heterosexual people open their minds and their emotions to people with a different sexual orientation and provide for full equality and human rights, including marriage equality.

-People with disabilities have developed organizations and taken actions demanding laws and practices which allow them to be included within the workings of society. Tens of millions of people have some kind of disability and every day, unfortunately, more people lose limbs or are injured on the job or in some other way. A more humane and just society will take these issues seriously.

-Progressive-minded people of faith have been politically active for decades in various peace and justice efforts. The African American church was a critical component of the civil rights movement, and the involvement of prominent Catholic priests in the movement against the Vietnam War played an important role in broadening out the base and power of that movement, and on many other issues ever since. People of faith also bring valuable insights from their spiritual traditions of importance to all members of a popular alliance.

The Rainbow Coalition Experience: Is the emergence of an alliance of this kind, an alliance that, as a key part of its program, would help mobilize for the right kind of climate policies, just a utopian dream? No, it is not. Within the lifetimes of a number of us who are still around, we experienced something like this during the 1980's with the emergence of the National Rainbow Coalition, which brought together all of these constituencies, some more strongly than others.

The Rainbow movement was unlike anything this country had seen in many decades, perhaps ever. Although it was built around Jesse Jackson's two Presidential campaigns within the Democratic Party primaries in 1984 and 1988, it was really more of a "third force." Jackson talked openly about it in these terms, particularly between 1984 and 1987. Its overall platform was very progressive. It was led primarily by African Americans with some involvement from other communities of color. It was a broadly-based coalition involving elements of labor, farmers, seniors, third party advocates, students, feminists, people of faith, gays and lesbians, health care activists, etc. It was specifically organized to challenge for political power. It had the potential, some of us believed, to transition, over time, into a U.S. version of a "third party," an alternative to the Democrats and Republicans.

But it didn't happen. It didn't happen because it was built around the charisma and personal energy of one man. And when that one man decided that he didn't want to risk his connections and access to Democratic Party funding sources and other support, that this was more important than the development of the Rainbow movement which he had done so much to bring into being, the National Rainbow Coalition was essentially hollowed out from the inside, stripped of almost all its vitality and growing power. Many of us continue to hold very strong feelings about the historic opportunity that was missed because of that set of decisions.

Learning from experiences like this, the first decade of the 21st century has seen the emergence on a world scale and in the U.S. of a similar but different kind of popular alliance movement, the World and U.S. Social Forum.

The Social Forum Movement: Since 2001 there have been a series of international gatherings, sometimes involving over 150,000 people, organized under the framework of the World Social

Forum (WSF). The impetus for the WSF emerged originally out of the political and electoral successes of the Brazilian Worker's Party. The first WSF was convened in Sao Paulo, Brazil as a counter-meeting to world capitalism's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. 12,000 attended that first WSF in 2001; by the next year the number had grown to 60,000.

Since that time, almost every year up until the last couple of years, there have been a series of WSF's and, emerging out of that process, regional Social Forums in Europe, South America, Africa, South Asia, South Africa and the United States. There have also been a number of local Social Forums.

The Social Forum movement is a progressive, multi-tendency, diverse thing. More than anything else it is political space for people who are active on a wide range of issues to come together periodically to talk with one another, both with people working on the same issue and with people working on other issues and from other countries, cultures and backgrounds. A strength of the movement is its diversity.

An example of its importance is that it was through the WSF network that a call was issued in early 2003 for coordinated actions on February 15th of that year against the U.S. and Britain's plans for a military invasion of Iraq. On that day 10-15 million people demonstrated all over the world.

In the United States there was a US Social Forum organized in June of 2007 in Atlanta, Ga. Upwards of 15,000 people came together for five days of meetings, dancing, singing, listening, planning, marching and inspiration. It was described as a "beautiful coming together" by one of its planners, Ruben Solis. It was a classic example of how empowering it is to have an open and inclusive process and structure. Any organization which registered was able to organize workshops on subjects of its choosing as long as the subjects were politically consistent with the USSF's broad principles. What this meant was that on the three full days where workshops were held, people could choose between 100 different options each workshop session, 900 in all.

The daily culture of the USSF—the way in which we interacted with one another—was deep and profound. Despite the heat and humidity of a deep South summer, logistical challenges like long waits for overloaded elevators, and the inevitable glitches and problems, the dominant spirit all throughout was collaborative, comradely and cooperative. It was truly beautiful rubbing shoulders, sitting next to, talking with, dancing with, feeling love and solidarity with thousands of sister and brother activists of so many cultures and nationalities.

The USSF and the WSF are not without their weaknesses, in particular the general inability of these networks to translate the national and international connections into on-going, periodic, coordinated actions on major issues. The successful call for anti-war action in early 2003 was an exception. Hopefully, in some way, this weakness will be overcome over time.

As this chapter is being written, plans are being made for a second US Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan in late June, 2010.

A More Explicit Political Alternative: There is need for some serious reflection on the experiences of the National Rainbow in the 1980's, the Social Forum movement in the first decade of 21st century, and the efforts to form a broadly-based progressive third party over the last two decades. This is necessary because the U.S. political/electoral system continues to be in serious need of opening up, of democratization, of making room for many more voices than just those represented by the Republican and Democratic parties.

Indeed, a primary reason why the climate legislation that is being produced on Capitol Hill is so weak and problematic has to do with the inherently undemocratic nature of a two-parties-only political system. Such a system essentially muffles the voices of those tens of millions of people who have political views that are more progressive than those of the big money-dependent, corporate-influenced Democratic Party. This system weakens progressive organizations and the overall progressive movement because we are given the choice of either backing Democratic Party candidates and processes that are in no way consistently progressive, or supporting third party candidates and parties who face immense obstacles in their efforts to win and grow.

Many activists, myself included, have been trying for decades to alter this set of realities. During the 1990's and into the first decade of this century, there were three national third party efforts that were progressive in their political orientation and substantive in their efforts: the Labor Party, the New Party and the Green Party. Today, as we're entering the second decade, neither the New Party nor the Labor Party exist as active, functioning organizations with on-going campaigns; only the Green Party has survived, and its major accomplishment is just that, to survive.

As someone who has been deeply involved in efforts to form a progressive third party since 1975, who was active in the Rainbow movement of the 80's and has been part of the U.S. Social Forum process since before the 2007 Atlanta forum, I continue to believe that a key part of a strategy for fundamental social and economic transformation in the U.S. is the development of a strong, mass-based political alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. However, hard experience has shown that it's not going to happen solely by establishing a third party organization and/or running third party candidates, as important as both those things are. What we need is something which brings together progressive third parties like the Green Party, individuals and groups like Progressive Democrats of America working within the Democratic Party in support of a strong progressive platform, and independent-minded organizations and activists working in communities, schools or workplaces who are not necessarily involved in any political party.

We need a broad, independent and progressive, united front, a progressive third force with an electoral strategy that involves support of both progressive Democrats and progressive third party candidates.

The climate movement needs this. That is a lesson that a growing number of climate activists must absorb as we reflect on what happened in 2009 in Washington, D.C.

As long as we are dependent upon the Democratic Party to advance a legislative agenda, as long as there is no broadly-based independent political force able to bring another credible voice to the table backed up by millions of dedicated supporters doing effective grassroots organizing, necessary legislation will continue to be watered-down or defeated by coal-state or corporate-backed Democrats.

What are some of the tactics and organizing approaches, both new and old, that we must use if we are to bring about change we can believe in because it will be change that millions of us participate in making happen?

FOOTNOTES

- 1) Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers*, p. 200
- 2) From "Talking Climate Strategy: Oakland Coalition Charts New Course," unpublished paper by Al Weinrub
- 3) Ross Gelbspan, "Beyond the Point of No Return," at www.heatisonline.com.