

The Fight For Environmental Justice

New Environmentalists Taking Bold Actions and Its Working

By [Kevin Zeese](#) and [Margaret Flowers](#)

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No longer dominated by the traditional “Big Green” groups that were taking big donations from corporate polluters, the new environmental movement is broader, more assertive and more creative. With extreme energy extraction and climate change bearing down on the world, environmental justice advocates are taking bold actions to stop extreme energy extraction and create new solutions to save the planet. These ‘[fresh greens](#)’ often work locally, but also connect through national and international actions.

The recent [national climate assessment explains](#) why the movement is deepening, broadening and getting more militant. The nation’s experts concluded that climate change is impacting us in serious ways right now. It is no longer a question of whether climate change is real – the evidence is apparent in chaotic seasonal weather; floods caused by heavier downpours of rain and deeper droughts; more severe wildfires in the West; the economic impacts of rising insurance rates, as well as challenges for farming, maple syrup production, and finding seafood in the oceans, among many others.

The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#)) [recently issued its third report](#). The world’s scientists found that taking action now to mitigate climate change is less expensive than doing nothing. German economist Ottmar Edenhofer, a co-chair of the IPCC committee wrote: “We cannot afford to lose another decade. If we lose another decade, it becomes extremely costly to achieve climate stabilization.” Previous reports have warned of the dangers of human-induced climate change, e.g. faster sea level rise, more extreme weather, and collapse of the permafrost sink, which would further accelerate warming; as well as a breakdown of food systems, more violent conflicts, and making some currently habited and arable land virtually unlivable.

The IPCC and national assessment create a sense of urgency even though the reality is these documents understate the risks and the need to end the use of fossil fuels. This week it was reported that the [IPCC’s language was toned down](#) during the political review in which countries that produce carbon fuels, like Saudi Arabia, Brazil, China and the United States, edited language to protect fossil fuel interests.

The effects of the race to extract every ounce of fuel from the Earth can’t be hidden. A [report this week found US oil spills increased by 17%](#) in 2013, with more than 20 per day leaking 26 million gallons of oil, fracking wastewater and more. In [February significant five fossil fuel accidents](#) were reported in four days. This week [Los Angeles was the latest to experience the impact of an oil spill](#) when 50,000 gallons of crude oil flowed down their streets and required evacuation. The adverse environmental and health effects of all forms of energy extraction are coming to light from [mountain top removal for coal in Appalachia](#) to [uranium mining in the West](#). Even four years after the [oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico](#), there is

no restoration in sight.

Action Increases the Cost of Business and Stops Harmful Projects

Recent studies show that protest can have a big impact on corporations. The study, [“Costs of Company-Community Conflict in the Extractive Sector,”](#) published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences included a special report entitled: [“Conflict translates environmental and social risk into business costs.”](#) “Communities are not powerless,” co-author Daniel Franks who is deputy director of the [Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining](#) writes “our study shows they can organize and mobilize, which results in substantial costs to companies.”

Around the world protests against mining, extraction and oil are [costing companies billions of dollars a year](#). According to the report, one corporation alone reported a six billion dollar cost over a two-year period. A Canadian gold mining company lost \$5.4 billion over a decade of protests, never extracted any gold and the project was suspended by court order. Protests also forced a copper mining project to suspend operations. Protests are delaying the KXL pipeline and many others. People power is real and has real world impacts that can defeat extraction industries.

Scott [Parkin describes the growing front-line environmental movement](#) in the United States writing:

“There’s an insurrection afoot. And it’s in America’s heartlands no less. Bold and effective organizing against oil companies, natural gas companies and coal companies has started this insurrection that has openly challenged these powerful industries. This phenomenon has spread across the country and created unusual coalitions of Indigenous communities, environmental activists and rural landowners opposed to corporate seizures of their property.”

The power of protest is being recognized by corporate media. This week [the New York Times focused on](#) a Keystone Pipeline protester from Nebraska, Jane Klep, in a lengthy review of her work with Bold Nebraska. The Times reports how

“TransCanada badly misread popular sentiment in Nebraska. . . Rather than rallying behind the idea of American independence from Middle Eastern oil, Nebraskans saw a foreign company coming into their state and asserting rights to land that had been in their families for generations.”

Coal also continues to be a focus of protest. The World’s largest Coal Company, [Peabody, has been facing protests all over the country](#). Washington [University students in St. Louis organized a historic 17 day sit-in](#) to end the university’s relationship with Peabody. And then, [seven were arrested](#) trying to enter the Peabody Board of Trustees meeting. This is part of [a nationwide student-led divestment campaign](#) against carbon fuels. The St. Louis protest followed [a barricade of the office of the president of Harvard](#) that led to [Harvard divesting from fossil fuels](#).

This week, [Yes Man, Igor Vamos, gave the commencement address at Reed University](#) and used the opportunity to put Reed on the spot. Vamos announced:

“This morning I had breakfast with President Kroger. Over a delicious scone and coffee, I was very, very pleased to learn that the board of trustees of Reed College has just now decided to divest the school’s \$500 million endowment from fossil fuels.

“This is indeed fantastic news. Reed joins 11 other universities who have made this commitment to the planet and the future. . .

“I’m even more excited about Reed’s visionary plan for re-investment. The money that is pulled from fossil fuels, the President tells me, has been earmarked for community-owned renewable energy projects. This means Reed is putting its money to work for a complete enviro-social justice program: pulling support from big oil while literally and figuratively putting power back in the hands of the people.”

Can we imagine how quickly the country would move from carbon polluting energy to a clean energy economy if every university took this step? We could [create a carbon-free/nuclear-free economy](#) in less than a generation. Sadly, in reality, Reed – who never divested from South Africa either – rejected divestment from carbon polluters. But, now they have been embarrassed not only in front of the Reed community of students, teachers and parents, but in front of the world for their unethical investment practices.

In addition to students, Indigenous communities in partnership with non-natives are leading the fight against extreme energy extraction as in the [Cowboy-Indian Alliance](#). This week [Enbridge Line 9 in Canada was blockaded](#) in Burlington where protesters opposed the inadequate response to the 12,000 anomalies that have been reported on the line. As the KXL and Northern Gateway pipelines from the Alberta tar sands are being successfully slowed by protests, [First Nations are turning their attention](#) to TransCanada’s Energy East pipeline. They are vowing the same kind of protests that threaten and have slowed other tar sands pipelines. [First Nations have also vowed to take legal action](#) to block a copper-gold mine in Canada.

Legal action is also being used as a tool for transformation in the United States. A youth organization, “[Our Children’s Trust](#)” is [arguing in the US Court of Appeals](#) for the District of Columbia that the federal government should be required to implement a comprehensive Climate Recovery Plan based on the doctrine of Public Trust.

The lack of a climate plan is also at the root of a [class action filed by insurance companies in Illinois](#). They are arguing that the failure of the government to prepare for severe rains and flooding caused by climate change is resulting in damages to them. Citizen activists are likely to intervene and join the call for climate action. These suits could become part of a wave of climate change litigation.

Tackling Trade Agreements and Greenwashing Too

Through trade agreements, Big Energy is trying to weaken environmental protections and increase their power to subvert democracy but people are stopping these too. A [movement of movements](#) has successfully stalled the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and now negotiators trying to move forward on its sister, the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (called TAFTA) are being protested. People on both sides of the Atlantic see the risk of the agreement to the environment and other issues and are seeking to stop the agreement. In Europe on May 15, [hundreds of activists protested](#) TAFTA resulting in 240 arrests by riot police who surrounded the protesters.

This was followed by a protest in Virginia when TAFTA negotiators met at George Mason University. [A coalition of food safety, labor, and environmental advocates](#) organized the action. The harmful environmental impact of TAFTA is becoming more evident as this week [a trade memo was leaked](#) that showed the EU was pushing the United States to expand its fracking, offshore oil drilling and natural gas exploration. Similarly, a [leaked text of the TPP environmental chapter](#) showed there was no enforcement of environmental protections; and the Obama agreement was weaker than those negotiated by George W. Bush.

Protests are also occurring against public relations efforts of climate polluters who are trying to improve their image through sponsorship of museums, operas and other civic institutions. There has been a wave of [creative and humorous protests](#) urging institutions not to take money from corporations destroying the planet which is turning the effort by polluters to improve their image into a liability.

Protests are escalating. This week there was an [unprecedented global event - communities on five continents took action against Chevron](#). They focused on Chevron's destruction of the environment and violation of human rights; and urged people to reject Chevron's brand including its subsidiary, Texaco.

[The largest climate protest in history was announced](#) this week for September 20-21 in New York City to coincide with heads of state gathering at the United Nations for a climate change summit. While world leaders are coming together, organizers are recognizing the power is within us saying:

“We want this moment to be about us - the people who are standing up in our communities, to organize, to build power, to confront the power of fossil fuels, and to shift power to a just, safe, peaceful world.”

And activists are thinking longer term and taking actions on their own. The United Nations' COP (Conference Of the Parties) global climate conference has become a sad joke, an embarrassment to humanity. Instead of expecting global leaders to take appropriate action, people are planning for the COP21 which will be held in Paris in December 2015 by [creating alternative villages](#) called Alternatibas. So far there are cities in France, Belgium and Switzerland. Plans are in motion in Spain, South Basque Country, Austria, Romania and even in Tahiti. [Alternatiba](#) provides a handbook, video and media tools to communities around the world.

Truth is Coming to Light

Not only are people learning that the climate crisis is already here and needs immediate action; and that they have the power to influence the course of events; but they are no longer fooled by the lies of carbon polluters and corporate misinformation.

As fracking protests increased in California, the claims by industry about how much money can be made have been questioned. This week the US Energy Information Agency [drastically reduced its estimate of recoverable oil in California's Monterey shale](#) formation from 13.7 billion barrels to just 0.6 billion barrels—a reduction of over 95%. Previous estimates were based on projections by oil companies. The number of new jobs and amount of money to be made from fracking was major talking points for pro-fracking advocates. Now people know it was false.

This week, a [Draft Environmental Assessment on the Cove Point Liquid National Gas terminal expansion in Maryland](#) reached the unbelievable conclusion that it would not “significantly affect the quality of the human environment” and recommends a finding of “no significant impact.” The drafting of environmental statements has become a farce in Washington, DC. What used to be a useful environmental tool has now become a vehicle for greasing the skids for environmentally dangerous projects, but activists know better. Within days [the phony report resulted in outrage and protests](#) at both Maryland Senators’ offices. Reports that fail to pass the ‘straight face’ test anger and mobilize activists, rather than silence them.

It is interesting Cove Point is happening in Maryland, where Governor Martin O’Malley fantasizes about being president of the United States. O’Malley is co-chair of [a new fraudulent Democratic Party group, NewDEAL](#). No, it is not about a populist agenda of Social Security and New Deal-like full employment programs, it is a front group where big corporations can put money into politicians who will represent corporate interests, rather than the people’s interests. DEAL is an acronym for Developing Exceptional American Leaders. The effort is funded by big energy, telecom’s and other big business interests. It took years for many to figure out that the Democratic Leadership Council and the Third Way Democrats were façade’s for big business, but now we know – as soon as it is created – the corporations are trying to shape future leaders with big corporate dollars under the misleading label of NewDEAL.

It took years to face up to the reality of climate change, but already the cat is out of the bag regarding the dangers of fracking. This week [an executive of a major shale gas fracking company](#), Southwestern Energy, Vice President Mark Boling, conceded what scientists have been saying for years: global shale gas development has the potential to wreak serious climate change havoc. A former [executive with Mobil made a similar admission](#) last year. This is one of many reasons why [fracking creates grass roots activists](#) and broadens the movement against extreme energy extraction.

And, many of these activists are finding courage they did not know they had. Recently [Jenny Lysak interrupted a Democratic Gubernatorial debate in Pennsylvania](#) – a state that has sold out to fracking interests. Jenny says “I’m not particularly brave; I just feel that there is nothing anyone could do to me worse than what they are doing to our planet and to the families who can no longer live in their homes.” She rushed the stage of the debate and held up a “List of the Harmed,” a list of 1,700 families impacted by fracking. The list is now over 6,000.

There are a growing number of Jenny Lysak’s. People are standing up as they see their neighborhoods, communities and planet ruined by the voracious appetite of extreme profit from energy extraction at a time when [we should be creating a carbon-free/nuclear-free energy environment](#). People are learning they have more power than they realize and are being inspired to use it.

This article is produced by [Popular Resistance](#) in conjunction with [AlterNet](#). It is a weekly review of the activities of the resistance movement. [Sign up for the daily news digest of Popular Resistance, here.](#)

Kevin Zeese, JD and Margaret Flowers, MD are organizers of [PopularResistance.org](#); they co-direct [It’s Our Economy](#) and co-host [Clearing the FOG](#). Their twitters are [@KBZeese](#) and [MFlowers8](#).

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Articles by: [Kevin Zeese](#) and
[Margaret Flowers](#)

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