

What Will It Take To Create Climate Justice?

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All of the elements required to create climate justice seem to be in place. The climate movement can put hundreds of thousands on the streets, organize creative civil resistance, get thousands to risk arrest and mobilize blockades of tar sands, fracking, oil pipelines and mountain top removal.

Polls show high levels of public support for taking action on climate change. A [2014 Gallup Poll](#) shows 65% of Americans support emissions controls and a 2014 [George Mason-Yale study](#) found Americans were twice as likely to support a congressional or presidential candidate who strongly supports action to reduce global warming.

There is strong scientific consensus with the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) ringing the climate change alarm for two decades. In 2014, IPCC reports and the [US National Climate Assessment](#) show that the climate crisis is here and affecting access to water, food production and health. The planet is in its [Sixth Great Extinction](#), this one caused by humans. The [World Health Organization estimates](#) that climate change currently causes 150,000 deaths annually .

Yet, despite all of this, the climate change movement is unable to move US or UN policy or force the economic system to respond adequately to the climate crisis.

The climate crisis is a [crisis of democracy](#) requiring a coordinated global grassroots mobilization to stop harmful policies and practices and build alternative systems that are effective and equitable. The climate crisis affects all of us and touches everything we care about. It will take a mass 'movement of movements' to counter the power of money and corruption that prevents the change we need.

The last two decades have been wasted by political misleadership and as a result, immediate action is required. A [landmark report](#) last week concluded: "By 2018, no new cars, homes, schools, factories, or electrical power plants should be built anywhere in the world, ever again, unless they're either replacements for old ones or carbon neutral." We have a big task before us and need to build a global movement to make it a reality.

Confronting climate change will require major political and economic transformations that will impact how we live our lives. We must transition from the Industrial Revolution to the Sustainable Revolution.

The State of the Climate Movement

The climate movement has made tremendous strides in building the structure of a broader movement of movements over the past decade, and it will develop further via the events being organized around the next set of United Nations climate change meetings in New York

this month.

At the global level, the movement of movements was formed outside the UN climate talks in Bali, the COP 13 in 2007. Calling themselves Climate Justice Now, more than thirty non-governmental organizations and social movements signed on to a [statement](#) that concluded with “We will take our struggle forward not just in the talks, but on the ground and in the streets.”

[Climate Justice Now](#) continued to meet after the COP 13 and grow. They developed a set of principles, organized alternative events at the COP meetings and published analyses of the UN’s climate negotiations. They participated inside the climate talks and engaged in direct action to protest the negotiations. Their organizing led to large [demonstrations of more than 100,000 people](#) and direct actions at the COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009 where [3,000 activists](#) tried to “take over the conference for one day and transform it into a ‘People’s Assembly’” to counter the “false solutions and elitism of the UN climate talks.” At the same time 300 people walked out of the conference and tried to hold an assembly with the protesters outside. The police disrupted them and more than 1,000 people were detained or arrested during COP15.

As we reported in a [previous article](#), the US spied on delegates and sabotaged the COP15. President [Obama declared victory](#) when he put forward a failed nonbinding agreement and Big Greens from the US including the Natural Resources Defense Council, World Wildlife Federation and Sierra Club all declared victory despite the outcome.

In the United States, a similar body formed during the 2010 US Social Forum in Detroit. The [Climate Justice Alliance](#) is composed of frontline environmental and social justice organizations that work together to move local and state governments towards renewable energy and a just transition to the green energy economy. Across the country [local groups have engaged in acts of resistance](#) including blocking pipelines and protesting [fracking](#), nuclear energy and [mountain top removal](#) among other forms of extreme energy extraction.

Big Greens vs Fresh Greens

One of the challenges in recent years was the conflict between these “big greens,” the traditional environmental groups, and [fresh greens](#) that include frontline groups directly impacted by the excavation and transport of carbon and nuclear fuels. The anger between these groups [can be seen in some of the writings](#) of frontline activists who see the big greens as “quelling dissent.”

[Tim DeChristopher](#), the climate justice advocate who went to prison for blocking the leasing of lands for gas in Utah, explained recently how the 2009 ‘cap and trade bill’ was a turning point. Activists believed cap and trade was a false solution but the big greens said it was the only politically realistic possibility. When the bill failed, people realized the big greens not only pushed false solutions but also did not know what was politically realistic.

Part of the problem comes from money. Some major environmental groups, [Sierra Club, NRDC and Environmental Defense Fund \(EDF\)](#), [took the position that methane gas was a ‘bridge fuel’](#) from coal. Methane is a greenhouse gas obtained through fracking that has a much greater short term impact than carbon. After [Corporate Crime Reporter started asking questions](#) it was revealed that the Sierra Club had taken \$25 million from Chesapeake

Energy, a firm heavily involved in fracking. Since then, under the direction of Michael Brune, the Sierra Club turned back an additional \$30 million in gas donations.

Problems with big green environmental groups working with industries that profit from climate gasses continue. A recent report shows how [EDF is supporting efforts for 'safe fracking'](#) (which is like 'clean coal,' it doesn't exist) through partnerships with gas corporations. Vera Scroggins, an anti-fracking activist, describes how these groups are "pouring money into calming fears and calming objections. They're basically promoting something that's been created by the industry."

In recent years the divide between big greens and frontline activists has shrunk slightly. [Research has shown](#) that blockades and other aggressive actions work in stopping or slowing environmentally destructive actions. The increased use of civil resistance in the climate movement led the [Sierra Club, for the first time, to engage in risking arrest](#) with Michael Brune getting arrested at the White House.

There is still a long way to go to stop the division in the movement and get traditional environmental groups to treat climate change as an urgent disaster for which real solutions and not false compromises are needed. Beyond that, the movement needs to be broader than the environmental movement to include all who will be affected by the climate crisis. To achieve climate justice will require building a people-powered movement of movements that can have a significant impact on the tremendous wealth and power of the global financial elites who currently control the system.

Broadening and Sharpening the Climate Justice Movement

In addition to getting the environmental movement to speak with a common voice on climate justice and the policies needed to achieve it, the movement needs to reach beyond environmentalists. Solidarity across issues is essential to creating the movement of movements that can achieve climate justice.

An important step in broadening the US climate justice movement took place this year at the founding meeting of the [Global Climate Convergence](#) (GCC) in January. Held in the Workers United Hall in Chicago, the meeting was attended by unions and by advocates for peace, food security, economic rights, civil rights, housing, the environment, renewable energy and ending corporate power. The GCC organized ten days of action from Earth Day to May Day to show that all of our issues are connected and that the climate crisis is the ticking clock that brings urgency to our work. The climate convergence is continuing with the [NYC Climate Convergence](#) being held for the two days before the People's Climate March.

Labor's involvement is necessary to achieve climate justice. The [Labor Network for Sustainability](#) criticizes the idea that "labor can focus on jobs, and leave the environment to the environmental movement." They describe this silo approach as outdated and ensuring failure for both movements. Their founding president and executive director, Joe Uehlein [argues](#) that labor needs to define and lead the way in a just "transition to a climate-safe economy."

The new [Trade Unions for Energy Democracy](#) includes 41 institutions from 15 countries. They seek "to advance democratic direction and control of energy in a way that promotes solutions to the climate crisis, energy poverty, the degradation of both land and people, and

responds to the attacks on workers' rights and protections." Their response to the climate crisis goes beyond the need to reduce emissions and protect workers to creating a world that is more just and equitable.

The People's Climate March also attempts to bridge this divide between labor and environmentalists; [Daniel Adam writes](#) "more than 30 unions presents a ground-breaking opening for labor and the climate movement." The downside though is that the price for getting broad union involvement was to avoid clear demands that would offend some unions or their allies in the Democratic Party. The tent is so big that "it even includes organizations that support fracking and the tar sands gigaproject," [reports Anne Peterman](#). So more work is needed, but progress is being made.

In addition to workers, business owners must understand the necessity of participating in the broad climate justice movement. The climate crisis will bring new challenges to businesses in the acquisition, production and transport of goods. It also brings new opportunities to be part of the solution. Either business will adapt to the changes that the climate crisis brings by adopting climate-friendly practices or they will become the blacksmiths and carriage makers of our time.

There are business groups seeking to confront climate change. For example, [BALLE](#) (Business Alliance for Local Living Economies) made up of 50,000 entrepreneurs and funders have been advocating localism, sustainability and ecological restoration since 2001. Other business groups raise questions, as [Chris Hedges writes](#) "The Climate Group, for example, which endorses the march, includes among its members and sponsors BP, China Mobile, Dow Chemical Co., Duke Energy, HSBC, Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and Greenstone." They do not advocate for "carbon-free, nuclear-free" but support a "prosperous, low-carbon future for all."

Indigenous groups have taken a strong lead in organizing and action for Indigenous rights and protection of the planet. Idle No More began in Canada as a series of teach-ins on legislation in the Parliament and when grew very rapidly when Chief Theresa Spence began a hunger strike on Victoria Island across from Parliament Hill in December, 2012. The movement gained international attention and solidarity actions occurred throughout North America.

The Idle No More movement brought greater attention to the challenges that First Nations face throughout North America and the work they've done to gain sovereignty and to protect the environment. Indigenous groups have educated about and advocated for protection of the air, land and water, have led marches and rides to raise awareness of critical issues and have organized blockades and other direct action to prevent further exploitation of their rights and destruction of the Earth through extreme energy extraction for oil, gas, uranium and minerals. In Canada, there has been both significant repression of First Nation protests such as the [Mi'kmaq faced](#) in New Brunswick and victories such as in the [Supreme Court decision](#) that granted land titles to First Nations in British Columbia.

Food and water are two reasons for all people to join the climate justice movement. [Food systems produce](#) 19% to 29% of greenhouse gas emissions making agriculture a major sector needing transformation. In, "[Grass, Soil, Hope](#)," rancher and environmentalist Courtney White describes agricultural practices that adapt to climate change impacts but also sequester large amounts of carbon in soil and improve both quality and output of food. These are positive solutions that are win-win for agriculture, people and the planet. On the

negative side, corporations like Monsanto and Dupont seek to control the world's food supply through genetically engineered seeds and increased use of chemicals. And [private corporations](#) are vying to take over water, meaning scenarios like what is happening in Detroit where water prices are rising and residents are losing access to water will become more common.

Jacqui Patterson, the director of the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program, points out that [climate change is a civil rights issue](#). In the United States, on issues of food, health effects, the cost of fuel or impacts of carbon fuel pollution, African Americans pay a higher price even though they use less carbon fuels. The same is true globally where the poorest nations using the least fuel will be most impacted. These are reasons that people who care about the wealth divide or inequality should be part of the climate justice movement.

[Veterans For Peace](#) has been making the connections between the climate crisis and militarism. The US military is the biggest polluter on the planet and uses tremendous amounts of fossil fuels. Current military conflicts are centered on control of oil and gas. VFP members have joined frontline communities in actions against coal and fracking and to [demand clean-up](#) of thousands of abandoned uranium mines left from the Cold War era. There will be a [veteran's contingent](#) and peace roundtable at the People's Climate March.

Youth are a foundation for climate justice advocacy. They have [used the courts](#) to sue for the right to clean air, pressured universities to [divest from](#) carbon energy and organized [campaigns to stop extreme energy extraction](#). Informed youth understand that the climate crisis is not something in the future, but shapes their lives.

Realizing Our Power

The ingredients do exist to build the people-powered movement of movements that can organize actions to expose and resist corruption of the political system and economy at all levels and create alternative systems that are based on principles of sustainability, solidarity, equity and justice. On a daily basis we see examples of actions in communities that resist the expansion of fossil and nuclear fuels and build local living economies.

Climate justice is in our reach if we realize that the climate crisis connects all of us and take action to manifest our power. As Alice Walker said, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." In this situation, we have a choice to continue on the destructive path towards climate chaos or to come together and build a future that not only addresses the climate crisis but is also healthier, more equitable and prosperous.

In the final article of this series, we will describe a common vision and strategy that can be used for developing clear demands and a positive pathway to the world that is needed and is possible.

This article is part of a series in the lead up to the UN Climate Summit and the activities occurring around that event. It is being produced by [Popular Resistance](#)

Margaret Flowers and **Kevin Zeese** are organizers with [Popular Resistance](#), which provides daily movement news and resources. [Sign up for their daily newsletter](#); and follow them on twitter, [@PopResistance](#). [To march with us at the People's Climate March or join us](#)

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