

Oakland Coalition Charts New Course on Climate Strategy

By Al Weinrub

In the wake of the recent debate over national climate legislation and the disastrous outcome of the House Bill, 380 different organizations sent a letter to California Senator Barbara Boxer, head of the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee, urging her to draft a Senate bill “that provides the transformational change and greenhouse emissions reductions required to avert catastrophic climate impacts.”¹ But the efforts of these organizations to argue for meaningful legislation have for the most part been ignored.

Despite the fundamental failure of the national legislative effort, new climate organizing initiatives are taking place. One of these, the Oakland Climate Action Coalition, represents a promising new strategic approach.

The Coalition was formed in April, 2009 to promote a strong Energy and Climate Action Plan for the city of Oakland, Calif. Pulled together by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the Coalition represents an unusual alliance of forces made up of about 35 local organizations, including environmental and environmental justice groups, green businesses, labor

unions, community-based organizations, and advocates for green jobs and sustainable development.

“What draws these unlikely partners together is the goal of a just and equitable energy and climate plan for the city,” says Ella Baker Center’s Emily Kirsch. “Whether you are a green enterprise looking to grow your business in a green and sustainable way; or a labor union looking to ensure jobs in a new economy for your members; or an environmental group that has done the research to know the catastrophic effects of global warming; or a community organizer who sees the effects of poverty on your

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Voices for Climate Justice

Emily Kirsch

The current economic model that we’ve been following for decades is failing us. Through our policies, the coalition is suggesting an alternative model that can

address inequities that are pervasive in the current economic system and its environmental impact.

What we can influence is local politics, local initiatives, and local legislation. If we can get what we want via our local government, then the City of Oakland sits in a position where it can set regulations on polluting industry, institute carbon fees that can benefit the community, create a revolving loan fund for solar installations or energy efficiency retrofits, or develop gray water systems, all specifically for low-income people.

Often, we’re told the city doesn’t have any money, which in a sense is true, but we are spending so much money to put people

in prison and to wage war in the Middle East. Rather than subsidizing oil companies, let’s subsidize local green businesses that are providing green collar jobs. It’s the responsibility of local community organizations to provide models for the federal government to follow. I don’t think the solutions are going to come from the top down. They must start from the bottom up. Then we can show the world that the solutions we’ve created are not just for the upper class, but for everybody. ■

Kirsch is convener of the Oakland Climate Action Coalition and works at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights



Donal Mahon

West Oakland is already the most polluted neighborhood in the state of California. The Fruitvale district is among the worst five. If you live in the flatlands, you're going to live 10 years less than the people who live in the Oakland hills.

The impacts of global warming happen incrementally. People don't see how it is going to have an effect on them. Some are worried: we need economic recovery, we need work, we're losing our houses and our cars. Others would like things back to where they were. However, if we go back to where we were, the situation will only get worse. There will be very few rich people, plenty of poor people, and a lot more dead people. We must reconnect and support each other, and maybe then we will generate a new movement.

When people don't participate, the few with money make the rules. We can't fight them with money. That means we have to fight them with people. We must

mobilize people who don't ordinarily vote or participate, to get fired up about their future to get out in front and change what is going on.

Our goal as a coalition is to encourage people in the flatlands to become more aware, more involved, and more active. To change the way they are living, they have to step in and be part of the movement, and be part of the leadership of the movement. Once they start having an effect and seeing that they can change their community, it won't matter how much money Chevron has. ■

Mahon is the business agent for International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 6.

constituents—all of us have a stake in making sure that this Energy and Climate Action Plan is done right for the City of Oakland.”

The coalition is pushing for a climate plan that not only reduces greenhouse gas emissions, but also promotes local sustainability. It is advocating policies that concern building and energy use; transportation and land use; consumption and solid waste; food, water, and urban agriculture; community engagement; and adaptation to climate change.

A central emphasis for the Coalition is creating local green-collar jobs in fields, such as energy efficiency retrofits, home weatherization, green construction, public transportation, recycling and materials reuse, and urban agriculture. The idea is to ensure full access to such jobs for communities facing the highest unemployment and poverty rates, and to provide job training and other community benefits. “We don't need any more pathways into prison for Oakland's youth,” says Kirsch. “What we do need are pathways into green-collar jobs.”

Another focus is on the health and economic impacts of global warming. “Global warming is going to have the biggest impact on working people and poor people,” says Donal Mahon, business agent for International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 6. “These people are going to be the least able to afford the impact of what happens; the costs are going to hit them the hardest.”

The integration of energy, food, transportation, air and water quality, and new jobs is meant to create a livable community and sustainable economy that will benefit Oakland residents, especially its most vulnerable communities. “The Coalition is bringing

many different sectors and interests to the table to talk about how we are going to improve our city. It's comprehensive and multisector, with the principle of justice grounding it,” says Mari Rose Taruc, state organizing director of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN).

The Coalition is also distinctive for its explicit efforts to organize low-income families and communities of color around an integrated sustainable development program, which involves mobilizing the people to demand policies, programs, and resources that are economically sustainable and benefit the community. “The local policy and grassroots organizing work that we are doing,” says Kirsch, “is always in the context of how we can redirect funds from a system that is inequitable and failing, to one that is just—working to strengthen our communities.”

“If we are successful in our community engagement strategy,” says Taruc, “it actually builds movement that is beyond the most immediate goals of the Coalition.”

The Coalition's emphasis on vulnerable communities and their need for sustainable economic development mirrors the unfolding worldwide struggle for climate justice. “The Oakland Energy and Climate Action Plan is not just about energy use or greenhouse gas emissions,” says Kirsch, “but about climate justice.”

An Equitable Solution and its Implications

Given that the United States alone is responsible for about 30 percent of the cumulative greenhouse gases in the atmosphere² and also has the most wealth of any country in the world (33 percent of family

wealth),³ it has by far the greatest obligation to solve the climate crisis. The Greenhouse Development Rights Framework, a broadly recognized basis for establishing equitable obligations, estimates the United States' share to be about one-third of world obligations.⁴

In light of these facts, the refusal of the United States to sign the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, or to participate in international climate negotiations until very recently, or to enact legislation to curb greenhouse gas emissions is not only astounding, but criminally negligent.

It is time that the United States shouldered its responsibility and put forth an equitable solution to global warming that would encompass the following points:

- Drastic emissions reductions and a timely shift to renewable energy sources.
- Transition to a sustainable economy with distributed energy, waste reduction, efficient public transportation, and sustainable agriculture, among other things.
- Demilitarization (no wars for oil or other resources) and international cooperation.
- Funding of renewable energy technology and adaptation assistance for developing nations.

Implementing such a comprehensive program would require a massive struggle against powerful ruling class interests in the United States. Nevertheless, if we cannot carry out such a program, there is little likelihood that the climate crisis can be averted or that climate justice can be achieved.

What the program requires is a long-term, sustained, and uncompromised effort to democratize energy, to rationalize production and distribution based on human needs rather than on maximizing profits, to dismantle the United States military establishment, and to reclaim the wealth of the super-rich to pay the climate debt.

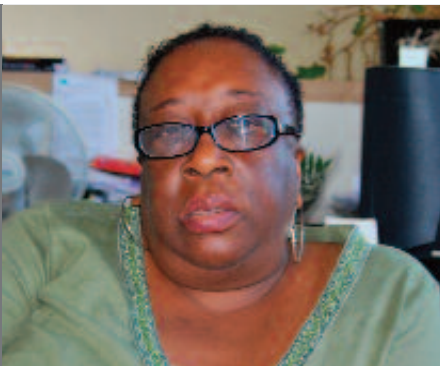
Political Shortcomings and Challenges

The climate program outlined above is a very formidable one indeed.

It challenges the climate movement to devise strategies for building a stable national political power base. It also requires the movement to contend with the massive political and economic power of the ruling elite, which makes up one percent of the population but exercises almost absolute political control at the national level.⁵

Creating a viable climate movement obviously has a long and arduous road ahead.

For one thing, the greater part of the movement has no political program independent of the Democratic Party (which itself has no program). As Ted Glick, long-time climate leader and policy director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network puts it, "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 willing to settle for something very different... [We need] people who understand the way in which corporate power operates."⁶



Margaret Gordon

Ten years ago, no one was talking about sustainability. The sustainability part of the Oakland Climate Action Coalition's program is what has been missing from the conversation, not only amongst pro-

gressives, but among elected officials and other stakeholders. We've got to make sure that our policy makers, our elected officials, have a disaster plan for their constituents and look at other economic models.

Do we build sustainability or do we focus on profits? Can sustainability have as much staying power as profit? Will status quo economics force out sustainability, adaptation, and all the things basic to our survival?

If you look at the auto industry, the banks, and Wall Street, the trickle down process does not work. The auto workers sided with the auto industry against cleaner

auto emission standards, thinking that it would guarantee their jobs. Now they don't have either clean air or their jobs.

The government has got to be in the place where it's not about the "I" but about the "we." If we are in the place of sustainability instead of this old profit curve, then we have something different: we have people who have consciousness and think long range, not just about a \$200,000 salary, but about influencing something that is sustainable. ■

Gordon is an Oakland Port Commissioner and codirector of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project.



Mari Rose Taruc

What the nonprofit system has done is influence groups to take on single issues. But our communities and our lives are not single issues. The environment is where we

live, work, and play, and we have to be true to the multiple facets of our lives and communities.

Our coalition is conducting workshops in the flatlands neighborhoods, the community organizations and the work they are doing in the community about climate change—how it threatens lives the plans being conducted to make sure that the people are taken care of. We’ve seen how community, economic, and redevelopment projects in the past have been ways to gentrify our neighborhoods. We’ve seen low-income communities of color get pushed out.

One of the things we are learning

about in the coalition is how to promote local businesses so that folks who live in a community can actually serve the community, allowing money to circulate back into it. Hiring locally leads to smaller developments in tune with the needs of the neighborhood. The Coalition would like buildings in Oakland powered locally instead of relying on solar farms out in the Palm Springs desert. When we improve the lives of people of color and low-income communities, it improves the lives of folks in the hills too. ■

Taruc is the State Organizing Director, Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)

So far, the Oakland Climate Action Coalition (OCAC) has charted a promising new course. First, by focusing on that sector of the population which has contributed the least to global warming but has the most to lose from its impact, the Coalition has aligned itself with the billions of people in the developing world. Second, the Coalition is struggling for a sustainable economic development model based on greenhouse gas reductions, community planning, and local green job development. Third, it has brought together a broad group of forces representing a variety of class interests and is pursuing a community engagement effort to contest for political power at the municipal level.

Beyond the Fight in the Street

The approach of the Coalition extends and deepens the efforts of other organizations struggling for climate justice.

A number of these organizations, represented by the United States Mobilization for Climate Justice (MCJ), see themselves as internationalist and explicitly anti-capitalist: “Urgent action to solve the climate crisis must include a complete transformation away from the dominant economic model of incessant and unsustainable growth, oppression and injustice,” says the MCJ manifesto.⁷

This part of the movement employs mass mobilization tactics and street heat, targeting specific “greenhouse gangster” corporations, environmental hotspots, such as mountaintop removal, and meetings of international financial or ministerial bodies (such as the December 2009 round of climate negotiations in Copenhagen). Over the last several years, it has brought hundreds of thousands of mostly young people into its fold and its energy and dynamism continues to put a spotlight on

global warming. However, reflecting on this aspect of the movement, David Schweickart remarks that “it will [have to] do much more than disrupt high-profile gatherings of the world’s elite. It will [have to] involve itself in the patient, difficult labor of contesting structural evil locally as well as globally, and of building counter-institutions.”⁸

In other words, climate justice forces have to develop a more comprehensive strategy for building a stable base of political power if they want the movement to mature.

The OCAC’s strategic approach has the potential of building a stable and significant power base that, if successful, could be replicated in cities across the United States. With a political constituency of this type, we could envision a climate movement that could begin to exercise influence where it matters—at the national level.

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Endnotes

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a journal for social and environmental justice

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ISSN#1532-2874

RP&E was first published in 1990 by Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation's Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. In the interest of dialogue, *RP&E* publishes diverse views. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors, Urban Habitat, or its funders.

This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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(Inside Front) Richmond refinery. ©2008 Scott Braley. (Inside Back) Urban garden in Havana Cuba. © John and Faith Morgan / www.powerofcommunity.com.

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