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Cracking Big Coal

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Scott Parkin, an organizer at the San Francisco-based Rainforest Action Network (RAN), is a straight-talking, get-things-done kind of guy, more at ease toiling behind the scenes in environmental struggles than serving as a personification of them. Yet in his fight against the coal industry he has embodied the qualities that define a new-model environmental movement in the United States. In the past four years this reinvigorated, multifaceted movement has chalked up an impressive--albeit frequently overlooked--series of victories against Big Coal, a leading contributor to domestic greenhouse gas emissions and a powerful lobby whose influence stretches from Congress to rural West Virginia courthouses.

A decade ago, the coal and utility industries began to push for the construction of a new generation of coal-fired power plants. Since then, 232 plants have been proposed. The environmental justice movement has defeated 127 of them. Not a single coal-fired plant was built in 2009. This past March, following several modest moves toward greater scrutiny of mountaintop removal permits in the past year, the Environmental Protection Agency announced that it was moving to block authorization of the largest mountaintop removal site in West Virginia, held by Arch Coal, an industry leader. Then, on April 1, the EPA proposed new water quality regulations for future mountaintop removal permits--imposing standards that very few, if any, mountaintop removal proposals would meet, as EPA head Lisa Jackson noted.

These victories have seriously set back--if not yet vanquished--an industry that accounts for nearly 40 percent of US greenhouse gas emissions and powers roughly half of US energy production. It's as if the antiwar movement had brought the military's recruitment efforts to a grinding halt. The coal industry's ability to do harm--to the climate generally and to communities living in the shadow of coal plants or mining sites locally--has been significantly curtailed, and many in the environmental movement are beginning to speculate about the beginning of the end for Big Coal.

Since joining RAN in 2006, Parkin has traveled extensively in Appalachia, where organizations such as Coal River Mountain Watch, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and Appalachian Voices are waging a fierce struggle to end mountaintop removal--a surface coal-mining technique that has leveled 500 bucolic Appalachian peaks, filled more than 2,000 miles of valley streams with toxic sludge and poisoned drinking-water supplies in West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. "The people who live and work there are some of the more inspiring figures you're going to meet in the environmental justice movement," he says. "Once you experience the situation there and the way they struggle, you don't want to let go; you want to do everything you can to support these people and work on this campaign."

In Appalachia, Parkin has worked to foster relationships between RAN and local and regional groups--many of them women-led or whose rank and file include former unionized underground mine workers--and nonviolent direct-

action organizations, such as Climate Ground Zero and Rising Tide North America. Back at RAN's San Francisco offices, Parkin leads the group's Global Finance campaign, which targets banking institutions, such as JPMorgan Chase, that fund mountaintop removal mining or the construction of coal-fired power plants. Thus, his activist work touches upon nearly every aspect of the coal process--from extraction to electricity production to the warming of the climate--and uses tactics ranging from public education and corporate pressure campaigns to local grassroots leadership development among Appalachians directly affected by mining, and nonviolent civil disobedience against mining companies or the EPA.

Parkin's organizing approach reflects that of the anti-coal movement more broadly--embracing a sophisticated diversity of tactics and targets, an emphasis on building strong relationships between traditional environmentalists and residents of Appalachia, and an unflinching determination to shut down Big Coal wherever it attempts to go.

So how did this movement pull off such decisive victories?

Parkin says it's all about "swarming"--the diversity of tactics and targets. It's a strategy that shuns delusions of a single silver-bullet solution to euthanizing the coal industry--say, a binding UN climate agreement or comprehensive climate change bill in the Senate. Instead, the environmental justice movement has come to recognize that Big Coal's broad influence and its central role in energy production make it extremely vulnerable.

Each point along the continuum of coal production--from finance to extraction to burning--becomes terrain for political struggle. The movement's all-of-the-above strategy--essentially, bringing to bear every available tactic to each register of the public and private sectors--has transformed Big Coal's reach from asset to liability.

"We've beaten back the coal industry by utilizing all the tools available--a robust organizing effort, litigation and public education," says Bruce Nilles, head of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign. "Wherever the coal industry is proposing these projects, we've got Sierra Club members in those areas." At the height of the rush to build new coal plants, the Sierra Club was filing a lawsuit every ten days and ensuring that its members voiced opposition to every project.

Crucial to the success of any of these tactics have been the links between poor and working-class Appalachians and mainstream environmentalists, which Parkin, among others, has spent years cultivating. These links have imbued the mainstream environmental justice movement with purpose and brought attention to Big Coal's economic impacts in coal country. The industry continually argues that the economic well-being of the region is tied to whether coal remains the primary producer of domestic energy. Poverty and infant mortality rates in Appalachia, however, are among the highest in the nation, and county governments throughout the region are shuttering schools and government offices. Mining activity there increased 22 percent between 1985 and 2005, while the number of mining jobs decreased 55

percent, because of the proliferation of surface and mountaintop removal mining, which require far smaller labor pools than underground mining. And, as the recent disaster in West Virginia demonstrates, coal extraction remains a very hazardous activity, especially in those mines owned by Massey Energy--a company with a long list of safety violations and headed by climate change denier Don Blankenship, one of the nastiest coal barons in US history and bagman for Republican politicians. Coal is a resource curse for Appalachia, which mirrors conditions in kleptocratic third world nations, where multinationals and governments prosper and populations continually toil in poverty.

"In Appalachia there is a tremendous intersection between issues of economic class and the environment," says Parkin.

By focusing on the effects of coal on Appalachia, the mainstream environmental justice movement has subtly transformed the climate change debate from one about what the world might look like several decades from now to one highlighting how the coal industry is destroying the environment and people's lives--primarily among the poor and working class--today.

More than 600 coal-fired power plants in the United States--many of them fully amortized and thus enormous cash cows for utility companies--spew massive amounts of pollutants that poison the air and water, as well as contribute to climate change. Nearly 200 permits for mountaintop removal sites await EPA approval, and Big Coal is expanding operations in the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming and the Illinois Basin. It is also eyeing environmentally

sensitive areas in Alaska. So what's next for the environmental justice movement?

Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity says that using existing clean-water and clean-air laws will be crucial. "The number-one, most important thing in my mind that we need to do to prevent another coal rush is to save the Clean Air Act. The coal industry, aided by people like Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, has a full-out assault on the Clean Air Act right now." Siegel adds that the act, along with other environmental protections, will help to cut the supply chain, forcing utilities to purchase more expensive--and in-demand--international supplies, which might cause them to reconsider coal altogether.

Other groups, particularly those in Appalachia, are targeting state legislatures and Congress, pushing for passage of an array of environmental protections, including the Clean Water Protection Act in the House and the Appalachia Restoration Act in the Senate, which would strengthen existing water pollution regulations by prohibiting valley fills. Meanwhile, direct-action groups are proceeding with plans for shutting down mountaintop removal mines in Appalachia and pressuring the EPA for more clean air and water regulations.

Essentially, the movement will continue to "swarm" but will also seek to consolidate its victories and build on them. "From the EPA to Wall Street, we've had recent success using a variety of tactics," says Parkin. "Now we need to continue the momentum and keep our eyes on the prize of ending our dependence on coal."