
Climate Activists Put the Heat on Obama

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“As visionary as Obama is, he is hamstrung by his pragmatism.” So says Michael Marx of the Sierra Club, America’s largest grassroots environmental organization. It is therefore “incumbent on our movement,” Marx continues, to press the president to be more visionary than pragmatic during his second term—above all on climate change, the make-or-break challenge for our civilization.

One way to push Obama is through “a show of force,” Marx says, by turning out large numbers of people at two big climate demonstrations planned this year in Washington. The rallies, on Presidents’ Day weekend (February 17) and Earth Day (April 22), will bookend a 100-day Obama Climate and Clean Energy Legacy campaign intended to press the president to show much stronger environmental leadership in his second term.

The Sierra Club is upping the ante another way as well: its board of directors has authorized the use of peaceful civil disobedience for the first time in the club’s 120-year history. “For civil disobedience to be justified, something must be so wrong that it compels the strongest defensible protest,” wrote Michael Brune, the Sierra Club’s executive director, in announcing the decision. The wrong in this case, he continued, “is the possibility that the United States might surrender any hope of stabilizing our planet’s climate.” In an interview with *The Nation*, Brune declined to specify what kind of civil disobedience was planned, or for when, saying only, “It’ll be focused on Obama.”

The campaigners will appeal both to Obama’s visionary and pragmatic sides. With climate change arriving much sooner and nastier than even the most pessimistic scientists had predicted, activists will argue that Obama must regard this crisis as fundamental to his

legacy: history will remember whether this president avoided the climate cliff, not the fiscal one. Obama seems receptive to this argument; in his second inaugural address, he declared that Americans must “respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations.”

Pragmatically, activists are urging Obama to use his executive authority and take immediate actions, which he can do without approval from congressional Republicans who refuse even to acknowledge the existence of climate change, much less move against it. These actions include the cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline; Obama’s decision on the pipeline, currently under review by the State Department, is expected this spring. Activists will also be pressing the administration to use the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act to slash US greenhouse gas emissions, with different groups pushing for a range of approaches (more on these below).

“To build the political space for the president and EPA to take the necessary steps, our movement needs to show some numbers and some militancy,” says Marx, who directs the Sierra Club’s Beyond Oil campaign. “We need to turn out 25,000 people or more at the Presidents’ Day rally and another 100,000 or more on Earth Day. And we need to show that it’s not only the environmental community that cares. It’s also the faith community, because climate change is the ultimate moral issue of our times. It’s also the consumer community, because oil companies take money out of consumers’ pockets every time we pull up to the pump. It’s the healthcare community, because fossil fuels not only overheat the atmosphere, they also give people cancer and asthma. It’s people of color, because they live closest to and get the most sick from coal plants.”

Of course, protest marches are a dime a dozen in Washington. Even so, the Obama Climate

Legacy campaign seems worthy of attention, if only because it is being sponsored by two groups that have accomplished something rare among environmental organizations over the last four years: they won. Both the Sierra Club and 350.org, its partner on the Washington demonstrations and the Climate Legacy campaign, scored major victories in the climate fight during Obama’s first term.

It was 350.org, a group co-founded by writer Bill McKibben, that galvanized grassroots opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline, the construction of which would light “a fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the continent,” in McKibben’s words. Days after 350.org brought more than 10,000 people to literally surround the White House in November 2011, the Obama administration reversed course and delayed a decision on whether to approve it.

As for the Sierra Club, while most big green groups were demanding that all environmentalists stand and salute the god of cap-and-trade—the Obama-backed legislation that went down to ignominious defeat on Capitol Hill in 2010—the club was collaborating with grassroots activists across the country to impose a de facto moratorium on new coal-fired power plants. As I described in *Mother Jones*, the Beyond Coal campaign helped prevent 174 (and counting) new coal plants from coming on line, thereby limiting America’s future greenhouse gas emissions nearly as much as the cap-and-trade system would have done (and that assumes the system functioning as well as its proponents had claimed—no sure thing considering how badly the bill was weakened in the congressional horse-trading).

As important as the victories themselves was how they were won. Both the Sierra Club and 350.org eschewed the inside-the-Beltway focus and top-down political strategy of big mainstream environmental groups, as exemplified by the cap-and-

trade campaign. Instead, they emphasized grassroots organizing at the local level on behalf of far-reaching demands that ordinary people could grasp and support. Their immediate goal was to block a specific pipeline or power plant, but their strategic goal was to build a popular movement and accrue political power. Without power, their thinking went, the best policies in the world were doomed to defeat, for a policy's intellectual merits alone could never persuade politicians to cross the richest business enterprise in history, the fossil fuel industry.

This same conviction—that political power is built from the bottom up, in local communities and congressional districts, and then brought to bear on Washington—also underlies the new Obama Climate Legacy campaign, says Mary Anne Hitt, the director of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign. "One of the lessons [from Obama's first term] is that there is no silver bullet for... tackling climate change. Dozens of organizations are addressing the issue from various angles—litigation, state and federal legislation, EPA rules—and we are all building upon our success in moving America beyond coal."

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The fight for climate survival may also benefit from a related initiative that environmental groups helped launch. In December, the leaders of Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, along with their counterparts at the NAACP and the Communications Workers of America, convened a meeting with three dozen other progressive groups to create something called the Democracy Initiative. The assembled labor, civil rights and environmental organizations agreed to share their resources and staff and collaborate in pursuit of objectives that will further both their individual agendas and the progressive cause. The Democracy Initiative has three initial goals: reforming the rules of the Senate to halt abuse of the filibuster; fighting voter suppression efforts so that all eligible Americans can vote; and reforming campaign finance laws to break the stranglehold of corporate money on government. "The current Senate rules blocked a climate bill from passing—there was no way to get sixty votes for a bill that was any good," says Phil Radford, the executive director of Greenpeace. "Voter suppression keeps people out of politics who don't share the right-wing corporate agenda.

Campaign finance reform is critical because the only way to win on the environment is for people to have more voice than the corporations that are getting rich from polluting the planet."

Progressive organizations have talked in the past about uniting in pursuit of common objectives, but those efforts usually fizzled. This time it's different, Radford says: "We're focused on having a really powerful ground game. We didn't invite anyone that didn't have field organizers and a substantial [membership] base." And the intent is to play hardball. The Democracy Initiative will not merely seek to gain access or befriend politicians, a mistake that progressives have often made in Washington; instead, it says it intends to punish or reward politicians depending on how they vote and govern. This resolution will be tested now that the most recent push to reform the Senate rules fell flat, after Senate majority leader Harry Reid reneged on his pledge to fix the filibuster in late January.

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Grassroots organizing is also central to a crucial battle against climate change that has yet to receive national attention: the campaign to block coal exports from ports in the Pacific Northwest. Coal is the most carbon-intensive of the conventional fossil fuels, and the West, especially Wyoming, holds plenty of it. Coal companies are eager to sell to China and other booming Asian economies, but that requires transporting the coal by rail to the Pacific coast as well as constructing terminals where it can be transferred to cargo ships.

"There are five proposed coal export terminals in the Pacific Northwest," says K.C. Golden of Climate Solutions, a clean-energy group that is a leader of the Power Past Coal campaign. "Just two of those terminals would have greater impacts on climate change than the Keystone XL pipeline would."

Paralleling the strategy and tactics of the Beyond Coal campaign, activists with Power Past Coal have reached far beyond environmental circles to organize and educate a wide range of constituencies about the links between coal exports and climate change. Power Past Coal says it has the support of 600 medical doctors, 450 business leaders and dozens of local elected officials, especially from the small towns through

which the coal trains would travel on their way to the coast. Most of these allies are not primarily motivated by climate change but by concerns over traffic and local pollution, Golden says, "but we always bring the climate angle in as well."

"Our strategy is to make [the idea of coal exports] toxic, to organize broad constituencies against it, and to make it hard for public officials to approve it," Golden adds. Building and educating broad constituencies also builds the political power needed to win the larger fights ahead. "Our approach has been much closer to that of the Beyond Coal campaign than to the cap-and-trade effort, but ultimately those two models for making social change need to come together. We do need a cap on carbon emissions.... We need to have that policy fight. But first we need to build the political power to have that fight and win it."

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Some champions of cap-and-trade now recognize this flaw in their previous approach. Praising the Beyond Coal and Keystone XL campaigns for "engaging people at the local level, which is a critical aspect of gaining political power," Dan Lashof of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) says, "It's maybe something we didn't pay enough attention to. It's a lot easier to mobilize people around concrete new investments in polluting facilities than around new legislation or regulations for EPA."

Policy expertise has its place, however, and Lashof, the director of the NRDC's Climate and Clean Air program, has produced a new blueprint for how Obama's EPA can use the Clean Air Act to cut greenhouse gas emissions. (There is a great irony here, because the cap-and-trade bill that the NRDC and most other big environmental groups championed would have stripped the EPA of regulatory authority over coal-fired power plants under the Clean Air Act.) The new NRDC plan would deploy the act primarily against the roughly 1,500 existing power plants in the United States; of those 1,500, roughly 500 are coal-fired, and they account for 40 percent of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, not to mention thousands of deaths, heart attacks and asthma cases every year. (To be clear, the Beyond Coal campaign is focused on blocking new coal plants.) The EPA would work with state governments and utility companies to find cost-effective ways to

scale back or shut down many of these 500 plants. Replacement power would come from improving energy efficiency and increasing solar, wind and other renewable sources, as well as some natural gas. The electricity sector's greenhouse gas emissions would decline by 26 percent by 2020.

A much more ambitious plan comes from the Center for Biological Diversity, which is urging the EPA to “set a national pollution cap of no more than 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide,” says Kassie Siegel, director of the center’s Climate Law Institute. Siegel and the center have long described the Clean Air Act as one of the nation’s most powerful tools against climate change—a point they repeatedly tried to make to environmental colleagues, the Obama administration and the media during the cap-and-trade fiasco, to little effect. Now that Congress is recognized as a dead end for climate policy, will that position attract more support? Already, forty-seven US cities representing 18 million people have passed the center’s “Clean Air Cities” resolution, calling on the EPA to impose the 350 ppm cap. “We haven’t succeeded yet, but we will,” Siegel says. “When people are marching in the street demanding action, the EPA will act.”

If the EPA does issue tough new greenhouse gas rules, congressional Republicans will doubtless try to block their implementation, but Obama could overcome them. Indeed, this scenario played out twice recently, when the EPA issued rules on coal plants’ mercury emissions and then on their interstate air pollution. Under the Congressional Review Act, explains Nathan Willcox of Environment America, the Senate can block any rule promulgated by the executive branch with a simple majority of fifty-one votes. In that case, however, the measure goes to the president, who can veto it painlessly, for such measures cannot be attached to other legislation. Opponents would need a two-thirds majority of the Senate—sixty-seven votes—to override the veto.

In short, Barack Obama already has it in his power to slash greenhouse gas emissions and thereby limit the damage climate change inflicts in the years ahead. But will he exercise that power? Activists can pressure him and appeal to his legacy, but in the end, the choice is Obama’s to make. And the activists are right: future historians—if there is a future on this rapidly overheating planet—will judge him accordingly.