

Why Isn't There a More Massive, Activist Climate Movement?

by Ted Glick

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Eight years ago I decided that I needed to change my life. The reason? The late summer heat wave which hit Western Europe in August, 2003, leading to 30,000 or more deaths.

I knew about the issue of global warming before 2003. Indeed, in 2002, during a Green Party of New Jersey campaign for the U.S. Senate, it was one of my major issues. Prominent in my basic brochure was this statement: “Move towards energy independence, reverse global warming and create jobs through a crash program to get energy from the sun, the wind and other renewable fuels.”

But it was that European heat wave that literally drove me to serious study about this issue, and by the end of the year I was convinced that the climate crisis was much more serious, much more imminent, than I had thought. Ever since, work in support of a renewable energy revolution has been my top priority.

There's no question but that today, compared to eight years ago, there is much more consciousness about and work on this most overarching and urgent of issues. As the climate crisis has led to stronger, more frequent and more destructive weather impacts—droughts, floods, powerful winds, rain and snow deluges, deadly hurricanes, huge tornadoes and more—so has it led to a stronger international climate movement. In 2010 there were 7,300 local actions in 188 countries around the world on the same 10/10/10 day of action organized by 350.org.

But the deeper truth is that, certainly in the United States, there is a disconnect between the urgency of this civilizational crisis and the response to it on the part of the broad progressive citizenry, those tens of millions of people who believe generally in human rights and fact-based decision-making. One recent example is the late summer and fall campaign against the Keystone XL pipeline. Although this was a victorious campaign, temporarily, the fact is that there were no more than 12,000 people at the biggest event of the campaign, the November 6th encircle-the-White-House demonstration.

For the climate movement, this was a very big action, the largest climate-focused street demonstration ever in the USA. However, compare this to the demonstrations of hundreds of thousands against the Iraq war multiple times between 2003 and 2008. Even taking into account the fact that there have been conscious decisions by key climate movement leaders NOT to organize major national or regional mobilizations, opting instead for decentralized, local “distributed” actions, the disparity of numbers is significant.

The movement against the Keystone XL pipeline DID mobilize half a million people but not into the streets. This is the number of people who registered their opposition to the pipeline through official government channels, primarily via online comments. This should not be discounted.

But again, is it realistic to believe that we are going to break the power of Big Oil and the coal and gas industries to determine government energy policy without large numbers of people engaging in direct action and mass mobilization, in addition to the other less edgy forms of action? No, it is not realistic; there is no way we will ever turn this crisis around unless much larger numbers of people take visible action in support of a clean energy revolution.

Why is it that this urgent threat to civilization-as-we-know-it, to the possibility of a truly just and human civilization in the future, has failed so far to generate the breadth and depth of active, visible action so clearly required? From my experience, I see four main reasons:

-Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, while playing a major role in educating millions about the urgency of the crisis in 2006 and 2007, presented a very problematic answer to what people should do about it: change your shopping habits; e.g., change your lightbulbs, buy a hybrid car, etc. There was very little said in "Truth" about the essential need for a mass political movement to overcome the power of the entrenched fossil fuel interests. And Al Gore wasn't the only one giving this "shopping" answer; many of the mainstream environmental groups did the same.

-Although Barack Obama was elected in 2008 following an election campaign in which he spoke regularly about the need for strong action on the climate crisis, he failed to follow through with any degree of seriousness after he was elected. This contributed to problematic climate legislation in the House heavily influenced by the coal industry. Most environmental groups went along with this legislation, many with serious reservations. By the time that it ultimately died in the Senate in 2010, the whole process had demoralized many and strengthened the climate deniers in both major parties.

-Human society's dependence upon fossil fuels is wide and deep. It has been this way for hundreds of years. A clean energy revolution, accordingly, will have economic impacts throughout all levels of society, from farms to homes to businesses to the way we travel. This reality has been used by the fossil fuelers to raise fears and undercut political support for the desperately needed shift to serious energy efficiency and a renewable energy-based economy.

-Finally, from an organizing standpoint, the demand for clean energy is just not as immediate an issue on a daily basis as, for example, demands for jobs, for labor rights, against police brutality, to end wars, for access to education or medical care, etc. This is why many sectors of the climate movement connect demands for a clean energy revolution with demands for jobs or to stop the toxic pollution of air and water that comes with coal, oil and gas production and burning. But it is also why many progressive groups organizing on those more immediate issues have not taken up the urgent but not as immediately-visible climate issue.

A few weeks ago I had some email interaction with a several people who questioned the assertion in my last Future Hope column, "Movement-Building and 2012," that the progressive movement should prioritize the climate crisis in our progressive movement-building activity in 2012. Their view, an understandable one, is that the issue which should be prioritized is corporate power and its domination of our economy and government. Here's what I said in response:

Bruce makes good points, and Heather is right that the 99% vs. 1% message/the Occupy movement has had a big political impact and connected a potentially powerful alliance of constituencies and groups.

Bruce says, toward the end of his email, that "there is no way we can deal effectively with climate catastrophe without first (or at least simultaneously) confronting global corporatism."

If it's not "simultaneous," as opposed to "first," I see little to no hope that we will have any chance to solve the climate crisis. And if we don't solve the climate crisis, the sobering truth is that it really doesn't matter what other progressive changes we make. They'll all be swept away by a rising tide of crop failures, stronger storms, droughts and spreading desertification, floods, sea level rise, etc.

We are already in great danger of hitting climate "tipping points"—like the release of huge amounts of methane from the melting of northern latitudes permafrost, or massive methane releases from a warming ocean—that will make it extremely difficult to ever pull ourselves back from an escalating series of climate catastrophes. These will hit those in Africa and Asia and the world's poor first and hardest but, in time, will overwhelm us all.

At the same time, a worldwide commitment—with the US giving leadership, something which definitely isn't happening now, just the

opposite—to a rapid transition from fossil fuels to wind, solar, geothermal and other renewable energy sources has the potential to create huge numbers of jobs and spur economic development. And the technology has advanced, and continues to advance, such that this is completely possible to be undertaken seriously right now.

It has to be “simultaneous,” not “first,” and the urgent clean energy transition has to be right at the center of anti-corporate campaigning. After all, three of the top 5 corporations in the U.S. are oil companies, and 5 of the top 10 in the world are. Big Oil is the epitome of the 1%.

As we enter the critical political year of 2012, I hope and pray that many more people in the USA and around the world will make a new year's resolution to speak up and take action on the biggest threat to our common future that human society has ever faced. *Ted Glick is the Policy Director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network and is a co-founder of the Climate Crisis Coalition, but these views are solely his own. Past writings and other information can be found at tedglick.com.*

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