

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Organizing Against Climate Catastrophe

Paul Messersmith-Glavin

April 15, 2015

Paul Messersmith-Glavin  
Organizing Against Climate Catastrophe  
April 15, 2015

Retrieved on November 19th, 2015 from  
<http://anarchiststudies.org/2015/04/15/organizing-against-climate-catastrophe-by-paul-messersmith-glavin/>

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

# Contents

Understanding The Numbers . . . . .	4
The Capitalist Climate . . . . .	6
Sustainable Exploitation? . . . . .	7
Coal Trains and Fossil Fuel Exports . . . . .	10
The Climate Canvass . . . . .	13
Face to Face . . . . .	16
The Immediate Future . . . . .	17

The forces responsible for changing the climate and endangering the future of humanity have names. Names such as: Chevron and Exxon Mobil, Saudi Aramco and Petroleos de Venezuela. They are the predominant groups responsible for playing havoc with our collective future. In fact, two-thirds of historic carbon dioxide and methane emissions can be attributed to exactly ninety entities. They are based in forty-three countries and extract resources from every oil, natural gas, and coal rich region in the world. They process the fuels into products that are sold to consumers in every nation on the planet. Of the top 85 emitters, 54 are in industrialized countries and 31 are in developing nations.<sup>12</sup> Knowing who and where they are demonstrates that an end to the problem is within our reach. In order to stop global climate change all we need to do is put pressure on these isolated entities, right?

Wrong. While these are the primary economic forces responsible for climate change, it would be a mistake to think if we stop these particular companies from conducting business as usual, we can solve the problem. They are only the most public faces of a system that goes much deeper.

Naming the responsible parties should not lead to a reformist strategy of regulating or even abolishing these companies. That would not be ultimately effective because they operate within a system that rewards their behavior. Very similar groups would emerge to fulfill these roles. What must be addressed and confronted is the social and economic system of capitalism that makes their work possible. This is the true enemy. The driving force of climate change is the capitalist profit motive and

---

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Lara Messersmith-Glavin, Chuck Morse, Jon Keller, Joe Lowndes, Sharmeen Khan, Kristian Williams, David Osborn, Don Hammerquist, Janeen Porter, Javier S. Castro, Will Munger, Kevin Van Meter, Ablokeimet, and Arun Gupta for their comments on drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Heede, "Tracing anthropogenic carbon dioxide and methane emissions to fossil fuel and cement producers, 1854–2010," Climate Accountability Institute, Colorado, USA.

confronting this effectively will require massive grassroots local organizing with an international perspective. It will require developing an extra-legal movement, one that does not play by the rules of established power. It necessitates a revolutionary focus, and attention to how the systems and structures of racism, patriarchy and the nation state intersect with and reinforce capitalist social relations. It will require working with a broad cross-section of the population, learning from folks outside established radical circles, educating ourselves and others, while moving with hundreds, thousands, and ultimately millions of people to fundamentally transform society. The civilization that gets us out of the climate crisis will be different than the one that has gotten us into it.

Many questions arise: what is required to create such a mobilization? How does social change happen, and can it happen quickly enough to prevent further catastrophic change? Simply having access to the science is not enough; activists battle conflicting and politically driven media messages alongside feelings of despair and apathy born of disempowerment. A new, ecologically minded paradigm will require not just information but an expanded and critical economic analysis, as well as shared assumptions about collective power and the experience of working together from the ground up.

In the Pacific Northwest of the US, several organizations have been working on responding to the crisis. Three groups working closely together in Portland, Oregon have been experimenting with new models. These groups offer ideas for organizers through their experimentation with different approaches to outreach, education, and mobilization.

## Understanding The Numbers

A 2013 study showed that “between 60 to 80 percent of coal, oil, and gas reserves of publicly listed companies should be

ety, such as patriarchy and racism, that maintains and furthers both capitalism and the state form, all of which are primarily responsible for the ecological crisis.<sup>34</sup>

We need to emphasize that what the climate crisis offers is an opportunity to fundamentally transform society into one that we really want: a society grounded in sharing and care for each other, in which all its members are supported in actualizing their full potential; a world where social and economic organization is informed by ecological thought free of social domination, where political decisions are made directly by those affected by them, and in which human activity no longer changes the planet’s climate.

Published by *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, originally appearing in *Upping the Anti*, No. 16. To get a copy of the issue of *Upping the Anti* this appears in, or to subscribe, go here: <http://uppingtheanti.org/subscribe/>

Paul Messersmith-Glavin is a part of the Institute for Anarchist Studies, the Perspectives on Anarchist Theory journal collective, and the Hella 503 Collective based in Portland, Oregon. He edited and wrote the forward to *Imperiled Life: Revolution Against Climate Catastrophe* (IAS/AK Press, 2012) and his essay “Between Social Ecology and Deep Ecology: Gary Snyder’s Ecological Philosophy,” appears in *The Philosophy of the Beats* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

Notes:

---

<sup>34</sup>For a revolutionary feminist perspective on patriarchy and ecological issues, see Silvia Federici, in particular “Women, Land Struggles, and Globalization: An International Perspective,” and “Feminism and the Politics of the Commons in an Era of Primitive Accumulation” in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012) and for the relation between social domination and the attempt to dominate nature, see the work of Murray Bookchin, particularly *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982).

inspire folks who think they are alone in their concern. It may help people to take a risk and attend a future action they hear about or voice an opinion amongst family, friends, or coworkers. It may make them more sympathetic next time someone comes to their door or invites them to an organizing meeting. One of the key ways to evaluate the success of the canvass will be whether it results in helping the St. Johns community mobilize themselves to resist the climate crisis and create alternatives: will it catalyze mass community-based resistance?

The effort by organizers going door to door, talking about a global issue with local ramifications, is significant. It presents a way for organizers to connect to other working people, engaging folks who have not dedicated their lives to political work. This is both a refreshing and a challenging process. It is a way of taking people's pulses, of seeing where they are at, judging their interest, concern and either willingness to take action or a next step, or to support those who do. It offers an opportunity for people not initiated into the left to offer their thoughts and opinions to organizers, telling us what they want and think. For us it is an opportunity to create connections and shared understandings.

The neighborhood climate canvass was just one attempt at initiating a desperately needed social movement to stop catastrophic climate change. It is something to learn from and build on. Local climate organizers will soon meet to evaluate the work's successes and failures and decide what to do next. We need to realize that even if we are successful, even if a global mass movement against climate change were to arise, members of the ruling class will look to co-opt it with partial reforms, and try to direct our collective energy into a project of maintaining existing power relations. This is why it is essential that revolutionaries be actively involved in helping to create this movement, continuously arguing for a fundamentally new society, with a different economic and political structure; one which recognizes that it is forms of domination in soci-

classified "unburnable" if the world is to achieve emissions reductions that mean an 80 percent probability of not exceeding global warming of 2°C."<sup>3</sup> Two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) warming is the limit recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.<sup>4</sup> But James Hansen, former NASA scientist and a leading voice on climate issues, claims that anything beyond a one degree Celsius increase will be disastrous.<sup>5</sup>

A two-degree increase will wreak havoc with the ecology of the Earth, with dire consequences for humans and other species.<sup>6</sup> In order to keep warming to 2 degrees Celsius, the economies of the world can only put another 565 gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. At the current rate we will reach that limit in 16 years.<sup>7</sup> At today's value, those future reserves are worth \$27 trillion and therefore are unlikely, given the profit motive, to be left unburned.

Nevertheless, "companies in the oil, gas and coal sectors are seeking to develop further resources which could double the level of potential CO2 emissions on the world's stock exchanges."<sup>8</sup> A recent study by the group Carbon Tracker continues: "Current extractives sector business models are based on assumptions that there are no limits to emissions. This strategy is not compatible with a carbon-constrained economy."<sup>9</sup> Capitalism currently depends on cheap energy to maintain the capital accumulation process. The continued reliance on fossil

<sup>3</sup>Carbon Tracker Initiative, "\$674 Billion Annual Spend on 'Unburnable' Fossil Fuel Assets Signals Failure to Recognise Huge Financial Risks," <http://www.carbontracker.org/wasted-capital-and-stranded-assets-press-release>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.ipcc.ch>

<sup>5</sup>James Hansen, "Target Carbon Dioxide: Where Should Humanity Aim?" *Storms of My Grandchildren* (Bloomsbury: New York 2009), pp. 140 – 171.

<sup>6</sup>Mark Lynas, *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet* (National Geographic, Washington, 2008) Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup>Carbon Tracker, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Carbon Tracker, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Carbon Tracker, *ibid.*

fuels is essential not only to the specific profits of individual energy companies, but also to the capitalist system as a whole as it is currently constituted.

## The Capitalist Climate

If the problem of climate change rests in a capitalist economy currently dependent upon burning fossil fuels, the solution to climate change lies in changing to a different economic system dependent upon another source of energy. In developing a strategy for stopping ongoing climate disasters, identifying who the major carbon producers are and have been historically, provides a useful basis for developing a strategy. But real change will not come until capitalism as a social and economic system is confronted and abolished. Yet the major groups working on the climate issue, such as 350.org, do not talk about capitalism.<sup>10</sup> They refer to fossil fuel corporations, such as the 85 previously mentioned, as “rogue” corporations. This framework ignores that these corporations are operating exactly as the capitalist system mandates. This is precisely what the movement against climate change must find a way to talk about.

The 90 corporations and state enterprises are compelled by the rules of capitalism to externalize their costs (i.e. polluting) in the service of accumulating capital. As Carbon Tracker correctly observes, “Energy companies have strong financial incentives to produce and market their booked reserves and oppose efforts to leave their valuable assets in the ground.”<sup>11</sup>

A recent study estimates that in the next sixteen years, 100 million people will die as a result of the changing climate.

---

<sup>10</sup><http://350.org>. This group turned out 1,000 young people in March 2014 with almost 400 arrested outside the White House protesting against the XL Pipeline and climate change. They are organizing a divestment campaign against fossil fuel corporations.

<sup>11</sup>Carbon Tracker, *ibid*.

tivist projects, work, school, and raising children, there is really only so much a small group can do. Still, too much time passed between the big canvass asking about interest in taking action and/or study, and the follow-up to organize the study groups.

Future neighborhood organizing would benefit either from faster follow-up with people at the doors or using existing civic organizations, such as neighborhood associations, clubs, and established social and political groups as a means of organizing. In an alienated society, it is difficult to motivate people you talk to at their front doors to get involved in radical action or even to participate in a study group. Groups that have already put people in motion, even just to come to a local meeting, might be a more effective means to start study groups and lay the basis for future action. Xloi, an organizer of the canvass who joined Hella 503 during the work, thought the canvass “was an excellent and creative test, as far as attempting to bring the discussion around climate change to a neighborhood.” In terms of future work, she thinks it might “be more effective to introduce the study format once there is more of a sense of shared goals by community members.” Along those lines she believes perhaps bringing people “out to a BBQ, or to a discussion having to do with coal transport and community health,” might be a good basis for engaging folks in further discussion.

Climate canvass organizers have discussed hosting public forums, where people can sign up to join study groups or take home the curriculum. Similar to working through established groups, this might be a more effective way to get people involved. This model was just tested by a fellow organizer and a member of the canvass collective with a grouping of 50 people at a downtown church. The facilitators used the curriculum as a basis for the event and nearly twenty people took the CD with the complete study package home with them. These are good beginnings to build on.

It is difficult to judge the effects of the canvass. Having people show up at your front door discussing climate change can

to start today. But whatever we can do in the coming years is essential to the shape of the future. Regardless of the thinking of capitalists and the ruling class, and whatever debates they may be having about how to respond, we must confront the realities of climate catastrophe and develop a movement to stop it.

The climate crisis offers damning evidence that capitalism is madness. The situation offers the opportunity for us to argue for the fundamental transformation of society as the only alternative to a barbarous future. Almost every aspect of modern life is contributing to the changing climate, from air transportation, to our reliance on cars, to how goods are produced and transported, how our food is grown, and how we light and heat our homes. The common theme that runs through all these things, and what must be changed, is that they are all aspects of a capitalist economy and ideology.

Although, as Sasha Lilley correctly points out in her essay in *Catastrophism*, the danger is that news of how bad things are getting, and how much worse they are likely to become, can result in fear and denial, and actually be counterproductive in generating a movement: “No amount of fire and brimstone can substitute for the often-protracted, difficult, and frequently unrewarding work of building radical mass movements, even under situations of the utmost urgency.”<sup>33</sup> But on the other hand, we need to be honest about what is happening. We cannot pretend the worst predictions about the future being made by climate scientists do not exist, but we should also not rely on fear of an impending apocalypse as motivation for people to drop their daily routines and get involved.

In retrospect the climate canvass should have been on a tighter timeline, but with organizers spread out with other ac-

---

<sup>33</sup>Sasha Lilley, “Great Chaos Under Heaven: Catastrophism and the Left,” *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), p. 76

Ninety percent of these deaths will occur in poor countries,<sup>12</sup> which speaks to the racist and class dimensions of the climate crisis. It is primarily poor people of color, living in what once was called the Third World, who have contributed the least to changing the climate, but who will continue to suffer and die as a result of it. This understanding necessitates an international perspective towards climate organizing. The “climate crisis” should be spoken of as climate catastrophe because this is what it is for the majority of the peoples of the Earth.

## Sustainable Exploitation?

Reformists call for “Green Capitalism,” for developing so called green technologies within a market framework. Some major unions, who have reconciled themselves with capital, also call for green jobs. Reformists suggest that capitalism could be ecological, that it is possible to eliminate the pollution of the air and water and that capitalism could not change the climate. This may be true. It may be possible to have an exploitative economic system like capitalism, based upon renewable, alternative energy.<sup>13</sup> Historically, this has been the case. As George Caffentzis reminds us, “The genocide of the Indigenous Americans, the African slave trade and the enclosures of the European peasantry occurred with the use of ‘alternative’ renewable energy. The view that a non-hydrocarbon future operated under a capitalist form of production will be dramatically less antagonistic is questionable.”<sup>14</sup> A green capi-

---

<sup>12</sup>DARA, <http://daraint.org/2010/12/07/2174/treehugger-climate-change-to-kill-5-million-people-globally-by-2020-it-just-goes-up-each-year-after-that/>

<sup>13</sup>A central question for future investigation is whether the logic of capitalism is inherently ecologically destructive, or will it revolutionize its mode of production to not change the nature of the environment so much that our collective future is put into question?

<sup>14</sup><http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-5/everything-must-change/>

talism will still be capitalism. It will continue to exploit human labor for profit. As Yesenia Barragan points out, “green capitalism maintains the economic, political, and social systems of power that have put us on the fast track towards destruction in the first place.”<sup>15</sup> It is hard to think of life outside of capitalism, but this is exactly what we must do.

As Mike Davis points out, in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, then emergent capitalism and imperialism motivated the ruling class to take advantage of previous climatic disasters to its advantage, using El Niño and famine to build its empire in the Third World in the 1800s.<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to believe that the ruling class today does not see climate catastrophe as something it can benefit from as well. In fact, the Pentagon continues to be the arm of the US government that takes climate change most seriously in its studies and plans.<sup>17</sup> The international left needs to take climate change just as seriously in its studies and plans, preparing for the worst while hoping for the best.

There is debate amongst members of the ruling class, the so-called 1%, in the world of the NGOs, and in progressive liberal circles about which way to go. Some argue for the development of carbon markets, in which the right to put carbon into the environment is bought and sold, thus continuing to profit from the emission of greenhouse gases, while slowly de-

---

<sup>15</sup>Yesenia Barragan, “States of Emergency: Green Capitalism and Transnational Resistance,” in *The End of the World as We Know It?: Crisis, Resistance, and the Age of Austerity*, Deric Shannon ed., (Oakland: AK Press, 2014), p. 335.

<sup>16</sup>Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, (New York: Verso, 2002).

<sup>17</sup>Nafeez Ahmed, “Pentagon Bracing for Public Dissent Over Climate and Energy Shocks,” *The Guardian*, June 14th, 2013 and Mark Townsend and Paul Harris, “Now Pentagon Tells Bush: Climate Change Will Destroy Us,” *The Observer*, February 21st, 2004 and CNA Corporation, “National Security and the Threat of Climate Change,” (Alexandria: CNA Corporation, 2007).

the possibility of having conversations with people not versed in all the lingo, taboos, and interests of the left. This provides interesting challenges as the different assumptions about the nature of social engagement, economics, and expectations of action are navigated, and delicate comfort zones are crossed and re-crossed. Most fundamentally, it offers a route towards activating a community-based mass movement, involving the diverse working class, which is essential to any possibility of overthrowing capitalism.

This work can lay the basis for mass militant activity, or at least support for it. A majority of people canvassers spoke to voiced support for illegal activity to stop climate change. That is something to build on and is also what Rising Tide organizers are finding in recent efforts against the megaloads in Eastern Oregon. People are hungry and ready to engage. They have a good deal of anger and determination over the issues, and are poised to consider direct, militant activity as a legitimate tactic among many.

## The Immediate Future

It is not an exaggeration to say the effectiveness of the movement to stop climate change over the next dozen or so years will affect the future ecology of the planet for the next several hundreds and perhaps thousands of years.<sup>31</sup> The amount of greenhouse gases that continue to be pumped into the environment is changing the ecology of the planet in ways not seen in millions of years.<sup>32</sup> The negative impacts we have recently started experiencing are expected to last and grow worse for generations, even if a severe reduction in carbon output were

---

<sup>31</sup>Nick Collins, “Carbon in Atmosphere ‘Could Warm Planet for Centuries,’” *The Telegraph*, November 24, 2013.

<sup>32</sup>James A. Foley, “Climate Changing 10 Times Faster than in Past 65 Million Years,” *Nature World News*, August 1st, 2013



zation of the session. That feedback was then brought back to the curriculum being developed for the neighborhoods.

In the late summer of 2013, canvass organizers went door-to-door again, getting names of folks who wanted to participate in study groups, and referring folks to Rising Tide if they were interested in taking action. (The option of doing disaster preparedness training was also suggested, and some interest was expressed in this, although it never became a major focus of the work.)

Of several hundred people canvassers talked to, about sixty expressed interest in participating in study groups. After taking some time to further refine the materials being used, including questions for individual and group reflection and discussion and detailed recommendations for facilitation, organizers burned the complete study package onto CDs and went back to the houses that had expressed interest with both the discs and color postcards listing study options to leave with folks who were not home, did not have time to talk, or wanted to think it over. About fifty copies of the curriculum were distributed in the neighborhood. At the time of writing, one study group has moved forward with participation from both members of the St. Johns community and the canvassers; it is difficult to tell how many other groups have sprouted up on their own as a result of the dissemination of the materials, or how many people have read the materials on their own, or shared them with family, friends and coworkers. Anti-coal sentiment is apparent throughout the neighborhood in the form of yard signs and flyers in community spaces.

## Face to Face

The climate canvass is an opportunity to get out of insular activist scenes and talk to other working people. It presents organizers used to talking primarily amongst themselves with

creasing them.<sup>18</sup> They promote so called lifestyle changes and taxing coal and oil companies for their emissions. Right now, this section of the ruling class — the Al Gores of the world — is clearly losing. No real change is coming from above to respond to climate catastrophe.

Rex Tillerson, the Chairman, President, and CEO of Exxon Mobil Corporation, best expresses the view advocating adaptation and a lack of concern for the consequences. Tillerson “told a New York audience that global warming is real, but dismissed it as an ‘engineering problem’ that has ‘engineering solutions.’” In response to the objection that changes to weather patterns will severely affect crop production, he said “we’ll adapt to that.” Most telling, Tillerson says, “The fear factor that people want to throw out there to say, ‘We just have to stop this,’ I do not accept.”<sup>19</sup> So for Tillerson and presumably other members of the 1% ruling class that control the huge fossil fuel corporations, we will simply adapt to a much hotter, less hospitable planet. More ominously, some members of the ruling class see a climate devastated world as an opportunity to continue making profits, managing the suffering, death, and dislocation of people while engaging in ongoing counterinsurgency.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>For an example of this on the left, see Robin Hahnel, “An Open Letter to the Climate Justice Movement,” *New Politics*, November 4th, 2013 (<http://www.newpol.org/content/open-letter-climate-justice-movement>) and the response from Nicholas Davenport, “A Response to Robin Hahnel’s Open Letter to the Movement,” *New Politics*, March 4th, 2014 (<http://newpol.org/content/response-robin-hahnels-open-letter-movement>)

<sup>19</sup><http://americablog.com/2012/10/climate-criminal-number-one-exxon-ceo-rex-tillerson.html>

<sup>20</sup>Christian Parenti, “War for a Small Planet: Adaptation as Counterinsurgency,” in *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2011) and *Life During Wartime: Resisting Counterinsurgency*, Kristian Williams, Will Munger, and Lara Messersmith-Glavin, eds (Oakland: AK Press, 2013).

## Coal Trains and Fossil Fuel Exports

In 2008, in the spirit of building an anti-capitalist response to climate change, a group of organizers came together in Portland, Oregon to form a study group on climate change. They spent over a year reading scientific, historical, and political treatments of the issue, with a focus on the relation between economic organization and the changing climate.

In time, calling themselves the Parasol Climate Collective, they began doing workshops at activist conferences, and meeting with local groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Portland Central American Solidarity Committee (PCASC) and Rose City Cop Watch to talk about how climate issues would affect each of these groups' work. For instance, with Rose City Cop Watch, Parasol raised the issue of future increased climate refugee immigration to the Pacific Northwest, and the potential response of law enforcement, which has a violent, racist history. Based on the assumption that knowledge is a necessary precursor to action, and on their own experiences of empowerment through reading and collective discussion and work, Parasol also developed a study curriculum on a wide range of climate change-related topics, from the science and regional concerns to historical precedents and social effects. Part of their work involved making these materials accessible and available to other groups who wanted to engage in self-directed study as a means of countering the despair (and thus apathy) the topic of climate change often engenders.

In 2013 Parasol was invited to work with Portland Rising Tide to organize a local climate convergence in which people from around the region would come together to talk about climate issues. Rising Tide is an all-volunteer network dedicated to organizing direct action around climate change and countering false solutions such as carbon trading and nuclear power in cities throughout the U.S and Canada. Portland Rising Tide is a very active and effective local group, continually organiz-

ing if they would support illegality to stop climate change, the majority said yes, as long as no one got hurt.

The canvass organizing group then planned a larger canvass, and discussed what they would want to come out of the effort. It was decided that those we meet who felt motivated to act would be encouraged to get involved with Rising Tide, as they are an open group with a variety of different possible levels of engagement and a strong communication infrastructure and web presence. Parallel to this canvassers wanted to suggest people make the time to read more about the issues, and get together with their friends and neighbors to discuss them by forming study groups. Facilitating the formation of study groups became the primary focus for the canvass, with the hope that this would then lead to both heightened consciousness about the issues and increased grassroots involvement in movement building.

Climate canvass organizers brainstormed useful materials to be used for the study groups, in part drawing from the curriculum developed by Parasol over the previous five years. It was decided to develop three sessions, with about twenty or thirty pages of reading, plus a short video, for each session.<sup>30</sup>

In part to serve the purpose of helping educate fellow organizers from various political groups about climate change, and in part to test out the materials gathered, climate canvassers put together a three part pilot study group, which about twenty local activists took part in. The sessions were organized using a dynamic, interactive approach to group discussion, utilizing small group and one-on-one breakout sessions and role-playing. At the end of each session participants were asked what they thought of the readings, the video, and the organi-

---

<sup>30</sup>To get a copy of the curriculum on a CD, write to Parasol Climate Collective (including your mailing address) at [Parasolpdx@gmail.com](mailto:Parasolpdx@gmail.com) or visit their website for a complete set of readings: <http://parasolpdx.wordpress.com>

ton in protest of Tesoro Corporation and Savage Companies plans to build oil terminals there.<sup>29</sup>

The idea behind the climate canvass was to reach out to the St. Johns' community, to judge the level of awareness of and opposition to the coal export plans, and to encourage further investigation and action by everyday folks. At the first few meetings, the goals for the project were stated as:

(1) To bring into our work strong, grounded, climate-based community organizing (starting in North Portland),

(2) To broaden understanding that the climate crisis is not in the future, but it is now and climate impacts are happening today in our communities,

(3) To spread acceptance of mass illegality as necessary and effective (civil disobedience, direct action, etc.),

(4) To add mutual aid and community resiliency work as complements to direct action work,

(5) To broaden past the focus on coal to climate, and to encourage the development of a shared systemic analysis (including, for example, other fossil fuel exports, capitalism, etc.),

(6) To build a replicable model that can be utilized in other parts of Portland and regionally.

The first phase involved a small "listening canvass" to get a sense of where people are at with the issues. Canvassers went to several hundred houses, knocking on doors and talking to folks, and found the overwhelming majority to fully believe that climate change is happening, with very few voicing any skepticism. When asked what can be done about it, the majority expressed individualist and consumerist approaches, involving changing lifestyles and buying habits. But when asked

---

<sup>29</sup>Earth First Newswire, "Rising Tide and Allies Shut Down Port of Vancouver," November 4th, 2013. About half the people that showed up for this shutdown were turned out by the climate canvass organizers. <http://earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/2013/11/04/rising-tide-and-allies-shut-down-port-of-vancouver/>

ing political actions and educational events, both alone and in conjunction with a variety of other organizations and communities. Early in 2014, they worked with members of the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla against the "megaloads," giant trucks transporting equipment to Alberta, Canada for tar sands oil extraction.<sup>21</sup> They succeeded in organizing three blockades of the giant transports, which resulted in the delay of several pieces of equipment and broad media attention on the issue, as well as 19 arrests.<sup>22</sup>

Rising Tide's climate convergences are generally organized in rural areas, with activists coming together to strategize, engage in self-education, and participate in a concluding direct action. Parasol members advocated holding the Portland convergence in the city, making it more accessible to poor and working class folks. The organizers were not able to find an urban location that could accommodate the expected three to five hundred participants, but out of these discussions a new idea for addressing the climate crisis emerged, as proposed by Parasol: a neighborhood climate canvass.

Part of the motivation for organizing the climate convergence was to enhance Rising Tide and other local activists' work against efforts to export coal and other fossil fuels out of the Pacific Northwest. Due to the cheap availability of natural gas because of the increasing reliance on hydraulic fracturing extraction, or "fracking," coal use in the U.S has been on the decline.<sup>23</sup> In response, coal companies are seeking to export coal to Asia. China now burns more coal than the US, Europe, and Japan combined.<sup>24</sup> China is currently building roughly two power plants every week and, following vast coal plant con-

---

<sup>21</sup>Larry Meyer, "Megaloads Headed Through Eastern Oregon," Earth First! Journal, November 21st, 2013.

<sup>22</sup>Earth First! Newswire, "Bail Set at \$150,000 for Megaload Blockade Arrestees," December 18th, 2013

<sup>23</sup>A.W., "Some Fracking Good News," The Economist, May 25th, 2012.

<sup>24</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/11/world/asia/11coal.html>

struction the last decade, plans to build 363 more. India is planning 455 new plants.<sup>25</sup> Worldwide, 1,200 new coal plants are planned, and the greenhouse gas emissions of those plants will be the equivalent of adding another China to the planet, currently the largest single emitter of greenhouse gases. Local activists are working against using the Pacific Northwest as a gateway for coal and other fossil fuels to the world market. The export of fossil fuels through the Pacific Northwest is a key conduit in the global circulation of capital. It is also essential for the booming expansion of North American fossil fuel extraction. Coal use is currently integral to capitalism, providing a cheap form of energy to fuel production.

The primary companies behind this effort are Ambre Energy, Arch Coal, SSA Marine, and Peabody Coal. The Portland Business Alliance and some unions support these projects. The Yakima Nation, the Lummi Nation, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, and a wide coalition of grassroots activist groups, International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) Local 4, concerned citizens, and various city councils oppose them.

In addition, there are proposals for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals in Coos Bay and Warrenton or near Astoria, Oregon; tar sands oil and gas terminals in Kitimat, British Columbia and expanded pipelines, tar sands export and coal export in and around Vancouver British Columbia; oil export (potentially tar sands) in Greys Harbor, Washington; and an existing oil export terminal in Clatskanie/St. Helens, Oregon that exports Bakken shale oil to the refinery near Bellingham, Washington.<sup>26</sup> There is currently a proposed expansion for the Vancouver, Washington terminal that, at 360,000 barrels a day, is bigger than all the other oil by rail terminals combined. Most of these have been proposed in the last couple of years, again

---

<sup>25</sup><http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6769743.stm>

<sup>26</sup>[http://earthfirstnews.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/washington-port-announces-crude-oil-deal/?utm\\_source=feedly](http://earthfirstnews.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/washington-port-announces-crude-oil-deal/?utm_source=feedly)

showing the emergence of the Northwest as a major front in the climate movement. There are over twenty oil, coal, and gas export terminals proposed, although only a few currently exist.

## The Climate Canvass

The idea of a climate canvass was to go door to door in the predominantly working class St. Johns neighborhood in Portland to talk about climate change, the effort to export coal through Portland, and what folks could do about it. St. Johns is located right next to the ports and is home to many Longshore workers who would be loading the coal onto ships to Asia. Its daily life is enmeshed in the work of the ports.

Members of the Hella 503 Collective and unaffiliated activists joined members of Parasol Climate Collective and Portland Rising Tide to organize the canvass. Hella 503 is a political collective which grew out of Occupy Portland and was instrumental in shutting down several terminals at the ports in solidarity with other West Coast port actions against “Wall Street on the Waterfront” on December 12th, 2011 (D12).<sup>27</sup> Longshore contacts were essential to the success of the D12 port shut down in Portland. Since those actions, relationships with Longshore workers have been maintained with various smaller acts of solidarity, such as leafleting workers, organizing public forums, and participating in solidarity actions with striking Longshore workers.<sup>28</sup> In fact, ILWU Local 4 unanimously passed a resolution opposing the proposed oil export terminal and in early November, 2013 a community picket organized by Rising Tide temporarily shut down the Port of Vancouver, Washing-

---

<sup>27</sup> Adam Gabbatt, “Occupy Aims to Shut Down West Coast Ports – As it Happened,” *The Guardian*, December 12th, 2011

<sup>28</sup><http://labornotes.org/blogs/2014/03/scab-bus-blocked-port-vancouver>