

Swarming the Climate Catastrophe

by Ted Nace



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One of the most underreported stories of the past year has been the incredible success of a swarm of grassroots groups fighting Big Coal. Employing both traditional organizing tools and Web 2.0 linkups, the anti-coal movement has succeeded in blocking so many coal plant proposals—67 since the beginning of 2007—that industry analyst Robert Linden of Pace Global told the Christian Science Monitor that the coal industry had entered a state of “de facto moratorium.”

This wave of potent activism comes on the heels of alarming reports and calls for action by climate scientists such as NASA’s James Hansen. Basically, if carbon dioxide emissions are not quickly phased out, the resulting rise in global warming gases could cause enough global warming to induce vast releases of natural global warming gases locked up in Arctic tundra, thereby creating an uncontrollable runaway effect.

To prevent such an outcome, Hansen recommends focusing especially on coal, which is more carbon intense and has much higher reserves than oil and coal. In fact, Hansen says that halting emissions from coal is “80% of the solution to the climate crisis.”

Greenpeace and others have exposed “clean coal” as a “false hope”: too risky, expensive, and far-off. The technology of democracy, spurred by grassroots organizing is the most urgently needed technology. Nothing else has the power to push out coal interests and summon environmentally friendly solutions.

All around the country, direct action and grassroots agitation has created a “death-of-a-thousand-cuts” dynamic, upping the risks of coal projects and thereby scaring off financiers. Energy analyst Robert Linden commented, “You turn off the money spigot, you’ve turned off those plants.”

•In Oregon and Delaware, citizens forged innovative new regulations requiring side-by-side comparisons between coal and cleaner power technol-

ogies, then used those comparisons to replace coal with wind, solar, and conservation alternatives.

- In Alaska, Maine, Michigan, Montana, and New York, organizers successfully worked through city councils, borough assemblies, and planning commissions to block needed permits.
- In Florida and Kansas, grassroots agitation created political space for mainstream political and business figures to push back against coal interests.

CoalSwarm (<http://coalswarm.org>), is networking groups and mobilizing new activists. It is an online information source where anyone can find or post information about the coal movement. For example, CoalSwarm contains up-to-date information on over 200 anti-coal groups, over 200 proposed coal projects, over 100 journalists writing about coal, and much more.

The aim of CoalSwarm is to support the many strands of the existing grassroots movement. Those strands include: militant groups in Appalachia opposing mountaintop removal mining; grassroots groups in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, and Texas; regional groups such as the Western Organization of Resource Councils; grassroots-oriented national groups such as the Sierra Club; student groups such as the Energy Action Coalition with 48 participating groups; direct action networks such as Rainforest Action Network, Rising Tide, and Earth First; and urban climate activists, such as New York Loves Mountains and Architecture 2030.

Too often, the “takeaway message” about global warming is one of personal failure. Unless each of us acts individually to cut our consumption, the planet will be toast. While that message embodies some degree of truth, taken by itself it is disempowering and alienating. What is more important for people to embrace is the power of decisive collective action. Just as society used mass movements and governmental structures to overcome the Depression or create the National Parks system, the same tools can be used to shut down today’s coal plants and replace them with benign alternative sources of power. This is entirely possible, we just have to keep organizing and make it a reality.

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