



Toward A Movement For Peace And Climate Justice

BY BRIAN TOKAR ON JUNE 1, 2008 · [LEAVE A COMMENT](#) [\[Edit\]](#)

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Complaining about the weather is about as American as apple pie, sitcoms and rock and roll. But while the rest of the world has been noticing for years that our increasingly unstable weather is an initial sign of potentially devastating global climate changes, our nation's collective heads have mostly remained in the sand. Finally, over the past year or so, things have begun to shift a little.

It helps, of course, that weather changes over the past year or two have become so severe that it's virtually impossible not to notice. The upper Midwestern plains have lived through 2 years of unprecedented drought; last year in much of the Southeast, it was even more severe, with parts of Alabama and Tennessee experiencing their driest weather in over a century. In Arizona-and also in parts of Greece and Turkey-summer temperatures have reached well above 115 degrees. We saw wildfires sweep through large, populated areas of southern California last fall and the hurricanes that devastated New Orleans and surroundings in 2005 were likely intensified by anomalously high sea temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico and across the South Atlantic.

But the particulars of the weather, and even natural disasters, are of merely fleeting interest to most people. In New Orleans, activists tended, quite reasonably, to focus more on the substandard condition of the dikes and how they were undermined by over-development of the surrounding wetlands. Most people perceived relatively little direct relationship between the devastating human consequences of Hurricane Katrina and the emerging global climate chaos.

This is partly the fault of those who are most engaged in communicating to the public about global warming. Most often, global warming is framed as a scientific or technical matter. The hazards are severe, but generally uncertain and long-range in nature. The proposed solutions vary from relatively trivial suggestions like changing light bulbs to disastrous technical fixes like reviving nuclear power or processing the world's grain supplies into so-called "biofuels." In sharp contrast to, say, the radical antinuclear activists of 30 years ago, almost no one is talking about the underlying roots of the problem, much less the need for a sweeping ecological transformation of society.

Who is affected by global warming?

Since the first Earth Day, way back in 1970, there has been a serious divide between those who view environmental issues as fundamentally social and political, and those who choose to focus entirely on the technical aspects of individual problems and their narrow, status-quo solutions. In 1970, Earth Day was explicitly cast as an alternative to a continuing focus on the human and ecological ravages of the war in Vietnam, and today it's no longer surprising to anyone that the day is sponsored by some of the very worst corporate polluters.

As social ecologists have argued since the mid-sixties, however, ecological problems both have serious human consequences, and are thoroughly social and political in origin.¹ With respect to global warming, this contrast is becoming

central to understanding where we are and where we may be headed. An understanding of the science and politics of global warming is becoming increasingly central to how we understand issues of social justice, or war and peace, and to how such concerns will play out in the coming decades. A brief look at the science may help illuminate this.

Last year, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued their fourth comprehensive review of climate science, saying for the first time that "warming of the climate system is unequivocal," and that rises in global temperature can only be explained with reference to human-induced increases in carbon dioxide and other so-called "greenhouse gases." (Methane, nitrous oxide, and the banned but persistent CFCs used in air conditioners and refrigerators, are the other main culprits.) For the first time, the statistical confidence level of many of their calculations came in at better than 95 percent.²

The IPCC documented an unprecedented convergence of findings from hundreds of studies and tens of thousands of distinct data sets in numerous independent fields of inquiry. This feat of scientific data gathering and assessment may have been worthy of a Nobel science prize if the panel hadn't already been awarded the coveted prize for peace, along with Al Gore. Never before have studies in so many fields converged on one disturbing conclusion: not only that the evidence for the role of human activity in altering the earth's climate is "unequivocal," but that the ecological and human consequences of those alterations are already being felt in literally thousands of different ways.

The IPCC's report was actually three separate volumes published by distinct international working groups, plus a concluding "synthesis report," all released over the course of 2007. Most media coverage, however, focused only on the first volume, where the assembled scientists described and evaluated a wide range of future greenhouse gas emission scenarios, their resulting concentration (in parts per million) of atmospheric carbon dioxide, and how many degrees of global warming would likely result from each possible scenario. Scientists such as NASA's James Hansen – perhaps the most widely censored senior scientist of our time – have convincingly argued that the IPCC greatly underestimated likely sea level rises, along with several other factors that negatively affect human populations. His analyses over the past year have suggested some very alarming conclusions: that a sensible extrapolation from past climate data would suggest a sea level rise of as much as 80 feet if we don't stop burning fossil fuels, and that we've already surpassed the minimum carbon dioxide level below which the Antarctic glaciers first began to form, some 35 million years ago.³ For Hansen, and many others, the question is literally whether or not our earth will continue to resemble the world in which human civilizations have developed; the only way to accomplish this is to leave most of the remaining fossil fuels in the ground. Meanwhile, policy analysts drone on about "acceptable" or "realistic" greenhouse gas levels that are another 30 – 50 percent higher, and even beyond.

What gets lost in all these long-term projections, however, are the ways that chaotic global warming is already affecting people around the world today. The IPCC wrote about this too, in their second report, specifically addressing the environmental and human consequences of climate change. But scientists and advocates alike would much rather debate parts per million of carbon dioxide than try to address the ways that people's survival is already imperiled by the over-consumption of the affluent minority.

Most of the world's poor people live in the tropics and subtropics. They are already living in a world of increasingly uncertain rainfall, persistent droughts, coastal flooding, loss of wetlands and fisheries, and increasingly scarce fresh water supplies. The IPCC predicts that severely increased flooding will most immediately affect residents of the major river deltas of Asia and Africa. On the other hand, the one sixth of the world's population that depends on water from glacial runoff may see a brief increase in the size and volume of their freshwater lakes as glaciers melt, but eventually the loss of the glaciers will become a life-threatening reality for those people as well.⁴

The data points strongly toward a worldwide decrease in crop productivity if global temperatures rise more than 5 degrees Fahrenheit, although crop yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by half as soon as 2020. In Africa alone, between 75 million and 250 million people will be exposed to "increased water stress," according to the IPCC. Agricultural

lands in Latin America will be subject to desertification and increasing salt content.

Probably the grimmest tale is contained in the report's chapter on health consequences of climate changes: "[I]ncreases in malnutrition and consequent disorders...; increased deaths, disease and injury due to heatwaves, floods, storms, fires and droughts; the increased burden of diarrheal disease; the increased frequency of cardio-respiratory diseases due to higher concentrations of ground-level ozone...; and, the altered spatial distribution of some infectious disease vectors," including malaria. There is little doubt that those populations with "high exposure, high sensitivity and/or low adaptive capacity" will bear the greatest burdens; those who contribute the least to the problem of global warming will continue to face the severest consequences.⁵

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, released in 2005, offered a particularly graphic representation of where we are and where we are headed.⁶ One page of that report (p. 119 of the Synthesis Report on Ecosystems and Human Well Being) offers a pair of world maps, each with a bar graph superimposed on every continent. The upper map chronicles the number of major floods reported in each decade from 1950 to 2000; the lower map displays the number of major wildfires. Everywhere but in Oceania—which is now facing such a severe drought that some major grain growing regions of Australia are no longer able to grow crops—the graphs rise steeply as the decades advance. Over this period, global temperatures only rose about one degree Fahrenheit; only the most optimistic of the IPCC's projected future scenarios limits further warming during this century to less than three additional degrees.

The biannual UN Human Development Report, issued in November of 2007, reported that one out of every 19 people in the so-called developing world was affected by a climate-related disaster between 2000 and 2004.⁷ The figure for people in the wealthiest (OECD) countries was one out of every 1500. Yet the funds available thus far to various UN efforts to help the poorest countries adapt to climate changes (\$26 million) is less than one week's worth of flood defense spending in the UK, and about what the city of Venice spends on its flood gates every 2 – 3 weeks. The report estimates that an additional \$86 billion will be needed to sustain existing UN development assistance and poverty reduction programs in the face of all the various threats attributable to climate change.

From Bangladesh to Darfur, we are already seeing the ways in which increased climate instability is exacerbating conflict and even bloodshed among people. Droughts in East Africa have caused wells to dry up and livestock to perish, fueling interethnic conflicts among the region's pastoral communities.⁸ And this is just the beginning. A report last November by the UK-based relief organization International Alert compared maps of the world's most politically unstable regions with those most susceptible to serious or extreme effects of climate change, and concluded that 46 countries, with a total population of 2.7 billion people, are firmly in both categories. The report, titled "A Climate of Conflict," states:

"Hardest hit by climate change will be people living in poverty, in under-developed and unstable states, under poor governance. The effect of the physical consequences – such as more frequent extreme weather, melting glaciers, and shorter growing seasons – will add to the pressures under which those societies already live. The background of poverty and bad governance means many of these communities both have a low capacity to adapt to climate change and face a high risk of violent conflict."⁹

International Alert's report profiles eight case studies of places in Africa and Asia where climate changes have already put great stress on people's livelihoods and often exacerbated internal conflicts. The outlook is significantly improved, however, in places where political institutions are relatively stable and accountable to the population. This contrast allows for a somewhat hopeful conclusion, with the authors extolling "the synergies between climate adaptation policies and peacebuilding activities in achieving the shared goal of sustainable development and peace." One specific recommendation is to prioritize efforts to help people adapt to a changing climate, especially where subsistence-based economies already contribute very little to global warming but are highly vulnerable to the consequences. Various international NGOs have already intervened, particularly in Africa, to document and disseminate adjustments in farming practices that have proven most useful in facilitating adaptation to a changing climate.

Another study, published in the journal *Political Geography* by Rafael Reuveny of Indiana University, examined 38 cases over the past 70 years where populations were forced to migrate due to a combination of environmental (droughts, floods, storms, land degradation, pollution) and other factors.¹⁰ Half of these cases led to varying degrees of violent conflict between the migrating population and people in the receiving areas. It is clear, states Reuveny, that those who depend the most on the environment to sustain their livelihood, especially in regions where arable land and fresh water are scarce, are most likely to be forced to migrate when conditions are subjected to rapid and unplanned-for change.

Since the Persian Gulf war of the early 1990s, activists have become increasingly aware of the devastating environmental consequences of warfare, and also of “peacetime” military activities. Oil consumption by the US military, for example, approaches 14 million gallons a day, according to Michael Klare, more than all of Sweden or Switzerland.¹¹ (A quarter of this consumption is in the Persian Gulf region.) The US military is responsible for thousands of toxic waste dumps, spread throughout the world. But today, we are in an escalating spiral of warfare and environmental devastation that threatens to spin entirely out of control if we are unable to achieve a different way of organizing the world’s affairs. The world’s militaries and elites are preparing themselves for the worst; those of us who seek peace and global justice need to come together as never before if those worst case scenarios are to be averted.

It is clear today that the past two centuries of capitalist development-and especially the unprecedented pace of resource consumption during the past 60 years-have created conditions that threaten everyone’s future. “There could be no clearer demonstration than climate,” says the UN’s Human Development Report, “that economic wealth creation is not the same as human progress.”¹² Those who have benefited the least from the unsustainable pace of economic growth and expansion over the past five or six decades are facing a future of suffering and dislocation unlike the world has ever seen, unless we can rapidly reverse the patterns of exploitation that many in the global North have simply come to take for granted.

False solutions

Over the past year or two, we have been inundated with a plethora of seductive, but ultimately false solutions to the threat of catastrophic climate changes. First, we face a well-orchestrated political push, from the highest levels of the US government, for a revival of nuclear power. Not only do we still, after 50 years, have no clue what to do with monstrous quantities of highly radioactive nuclear waste, but if our societies do commit the massive capital resources needed to build a new generation of nuclear power plants-at least tripling the present number according to many estimates-there will be literally no funds left to develop truly green, solar-based alternatives, even in the long run.

Further, a significant expansion of nuclear power would expose countless more communities to the legacy of cancer that critical scientists such as Ernest Sternglass have documented, and additional indigenous communities to the even more severe consequences of uranium mining and milling. Indeed, we would soon run out of the relatively accessible uranium ore that now minimizes greenhouse gas emissions from the nuclear fuel production chain, and the energy needed to mine and purify more uranium would quickly become yet another large contributor to catastrophic global warming.¹³ For the first time since the partial nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island in central Pennsylvania, US utilities are considering the construction of new nuclear power plants, thanks to a new round of subsidies orchestrated by the Bush administration, and appended to the latest round of energy and climate bills considered by Congress. This expanded nuclear initiative clearly needs to be stopped.

Another false solution to global warming that we read a great deal about are so-called “biofuels.” (Activists in the global South use the more appropriate term, “agrofuels,” as these are first and foremost products of global agribusiness.¹⁴) Running our cars on ethanol fermented from corn and diesel fuel made from soybeans and other food crops is already contributing to a worldwide food shortage that has caused starvation and food riots in Mexico, Egypt, Thailand, Haiti, and all around the world.¹⁵ The amount of corn needed to produce the ethanol for one SUV tank is enough to feed a hungry person for a year.¹⁶

Even if the entire US corn crop were to be used for fuel, it would only displace about 12 percent of current gasoline use, according to University of Minnesota researchers.¹⁷ The current push for agrofuels has consumed a growing share of US corn—at least 20 percent last year, and rising—and encouraged growers of crops such as wheat and soybeans to transfer acreage to growing corn. Land in the Amazon and other fragile regions is now being plowed under to grow soybeans for export, while Brazil's uniquely biodiverse coastal grasslands are appropriated to grow sugarcane—a much more efficient source of ethanol.¹⁸ Further, two studies released earlier this year show that deforestation and other changes in land use that go along with agrofuel development clearly make these fuels net contributors to global warming.¹⁹

The increasingly fashionable “biodiesel” alternative can be equally problematic. In contrast to the waste oil from restaurants that is favored by hobbyists, commercial supplies of biodiesel usually come from GMO soybean or canola fields in the US Midwest, Canada, or the Amazon, or worse, from the vast monoculture oil palm plantations that have displaced more than 80 percent of the native rainforests of Indonesia and Malaysia. As the global food crisis has escalated, agrofuel proponents have asserted that using food crops for fuel is only a temporary solution, and that soon we will run all of our cars on fuel extracted from grasses and trees; this dangerous myth is mainly underwriting a new wave of subsidies to the US biotechnology industry.

Third, and perhaps most insidiously, we are told that if the world is to make significant reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases, the only acceptable way to carry out these reductions is through the wonders of the so-called “free market.” When Al Gore (as Vice President) went to Kyoto in 1997, he offered that the US would sign on to what soon became the Kyoto Protocol under two conditions: that mandated reductions in greenhouse gas emissions be made far less ambitious, and that any such reductions be implemented through market-based trading of “rights to pollute” among companies and among countries. If one company, for example, failed to meet its quota for emission reductions, it could purchase the difference from another permit holder that reduced its emissions faster, theoretically inducing companies to implement the most cost-effective changes as soon as possible.

Of course, the US never adopted the Kyoto Protocol, but the rest of the world has had to live with the consequences of Gore's proposals, creating what the British columnist George Monbiot has aptly termed “an exuberant market in fake emissions cuts.”²⁰ The European Union has supported trading of carbon emissions permits for a few years now, and their “cap-and-trade” scheme has represented a huge new subsidy to highly polluting corporations, without any demonstrable reduction in their contributions to destabilizing the climate. Meanwhile, European governments are actively supplementing carbon trading with active public support for energy conservation and alternative energy technologies; only here in the US do such technologies (in marked contrast to nuclear power and agrofuels) first have to prove their viability in the so-called “free market.”

Carbon offsets are the other popular “market-based” solution. Frequently compared to the ways sinners used to buy indulgences from the Catholic church during the Middle Ages, the purchase of carbon offsets from projects in other parts of the world is even farther from a real solution. Larry Lohmann of the UK's CornerHouse research group has demonstrated in detail how carbon offsets are encouraging the conversion of native forests into monoculture tree plantations, lengthening the lifespan of polluting industrial facilities and toxic landfills in Asia and Africa in exchange for incremental changes in their operations, and ultimately perpetuating the very inequalities that we need to eliminate in order to create a more just and sustainable world.²¹ Even if they can occasionally help support beneficial projects, offsets represent a gaping “hole” in any mandated “cap” in carbon dioxide emissions—a way for polluting industries to continue business as usual at home while contributing nominally to emission reductions elsewhere. This system will simply not bring us any closer to the zero-emissions future that many analysts have suggested is both necessary and achievable.

What kind of movement?

The last time a popular movement compelled significant changes in US environmental and energy policies was during the late 1970s. In the aftermath of the OPEC oil embargo, imposed during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the nuclear and utility

industries adopted a plan to construct more than 300 nuclear power plants in the United States by the year 2000. Utility and state officials identified rural communities across the US as potential sites for new nuclear facilities, and the popular response was swift and unanticipated. A militant grassroots antinuclear movement united back-to-the-landers and traditional rural dwellers with seasoned urban activists and a new generation of environmentalists who only partially experienced the ferment of the 1960s.

In April of 1977, over 1400 people were arrested trying to nonviolently occupy a nuclear construction site in the coastal town of Seabrook, New Hampshire.²² This event helped inspire the emergence of decentralized, grassroots antinuclear alliances all across the country, committed to nonviolent direct action, bottom-up forms of internal organization, and a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between technological and social changes. Not only did these groups adopt an uncompromising call for “No Nukes,” but many promoted a vision of an entirely new social order, rooted in decentralized, solar-powered communities empowered to decide their energy future and also their political future. If the nuclear state almost inevitably leads to a police state—due to the massive security apparatus necessary to protect hundreds of nuclear plants and radioactive waste dumps all over the country—a solar-based energy system could be the underpinning for a radically decentralized and directly democratic model for society.

This movement was so successful in raising the hazards of nuclear power as a matter of urgent public concern that nuclear construction projects all over the US began to be cancelled. When the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania partially melted down in March of 1979, it spelled the end of the nuclear expansion. While the Bush administration today is doing everything possible to underwrite a revival of nuclear power, it is still the case that no new nuclear plants have been licensed or built in the United States since Three Mile Island. The antinuclear movement of the late 1970s also spawned the first wave of significant development of solar and wind technologies, aided by substantial federal tax benefits for solar installations, and helped launch a visionary “green cities” movement that captured the imaginations of architects, planners and ordinary citizens.

The 1970s and early '80s (before the “Reagan revolution” fully took hold) were relatively hopeful times, and utopian thinking was far more widespread than it is today. Some antinuclear activists looked to the emerging outlook of social ecology—developed by Murray Bookchin and others—as a new theoretical grounding for a revolutionary ecological politics and philosophy. Social ecology challenges prevailing views about the evolution of social and cultural relationships to non-human nature, and explores the roots of domination in the earliest emergence of human social hierarchies.²³ For the activists of the period, Bookchin’s insistence that environmental problems are mainly social and political problems encouraged radical responses to ecological concerns, as well as reconstructive visions of a fundamentally transformed society. Similarly, social ecology’s emphasis on popular power and direct democracy helped inspire many antiglobalization activists during the late 1990s.

Radically reconstructive social visions are relatively scarce in today’s political climate, dominated as it is by endless war and rapidly rising inequality. But dissatisfaction with the status quo reaches both widely and deeply among many sectors of the US population. While elite discourse and the corporate media continue to push political debates rightward and politicians of both major parties glibly comply, poll after poll suggests the potential for a new opening, reaching far beyond the confines of what has become politically acceptable. The more people consume, and the deeper into debt they fall, the less satisfied most people seem to be with the world of business-as-usual.

Toward a movement for Climate Justice

As with so many other pressing issues of our time, the impetus for a movement that can reach beyond the status quo and meaningfully confront the full consequences of global climate chaos is coming to us mainly from other parts of the world. A global Climate Justice movement is taking shape, uniting indigenous opponents of biofuel plantations, international carbon trading skeptics, long-time antinuclear and global justice activists, and many others. One of the first signs of this movement’s emergence as a new global reality occurred in an unlikely place: Bali, Indonesia during last winter’s official

Conference of the Parties to the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change.

With the US government continuing to stonewall in international climate negotiations, and most other rich countries now seeking to perpetuate market-centered approaches that benefit the wealthy at the expense of everyone else, the atmosphere at this latest meeting was more polarized than ever. Questions of justice and equity, ignored in these meetings at least since the Kyoto Protocol was finalized a decade ago, were raised both inside and outside the official proceedings, and those who are chronically excluded struggled to make their voices heard. They opposed the appropriation of native forests in the global South to further the North's carbon offset schemes, and spoke out against the World Bank's expanding influence over how international funds for climate mitigation and adaptation are to be allocated.

Anne Petermann, of the Global Justice Ecology Project, who was on the scene in Bali, described "a very vocal and militant demonstration during the World Bank's launch of the Forest Carbon Partnership [sic] Facility. Demonstrators staged a die-in with individuals representing different peoples, ecosystems and island nations that are threatened with extinction due to the official focus on market-based false solutions to climate change. The chants of hundreds of protestors included 'World Bank: Hands Off,' and could easily be heard inside the official proceedings... Thousands marched through the streets in a highly diverse assemblage of activists and movements united in the call for immediate and effective action on climate change."²⁴

An indigenous people's declaration, issued early on in the proceedings, not only called for "full and meaningful participation" of indigenous representatives, but demanded that those assembled "recognize and take action to curb the adverse impacts of climate change on indigenous peoples; and to refrain from adaptation and mitigation schemes and projects promoted as solutions to climate change that devastate Indigenous People's lands and territories and cause more human rights violations, like market based mechanisms, carbon trading, agrofuels and avoided deforestation."²⁵ The latter term is UN-speak for the persistent effort to use carbon offsets as the primary means to combat deforestation, while leaving forest dwelling peoples largely out of the picture.

In January and February, several representatives of the international Durban Group on Climate Justice²⁶-formed in 2004 to resist the rising hegemony of carbon trading and offset schemes-toured the US and inspired a new convergence of global justice activists, opponents of coal industry expansion, long time antinuclear and environmental justice advocates and others. Strategy meetings on both coasts began to explore how a homegrown Climate Justice movement might begin to take shape. A declaration initiated by California environmental justice advocates, and signed by more than 25 in-state groups and others across the country and around the world, affirmed their opposition to carbon trading as a false solution to global warming, highlighted the ways in which Asian, African American, Latino and Native American communities bear the heaviest impacts of the fossil fuel economy, and further pledged that the California Environmental Justice Movement will support conservation, regulatory, and other measures to address greenhouse gases only if they directly and significantly reduce emissions, require the shift away from use of fossil fuels and nuclear power, and do not cause or exacerbate the pollution burden of poor communities of color in the United States and developing nations around the world...²⁷

This past April, the decentralized activist collective Rising Tide North America organized a day of demonstrations and direct actions focused on the ever-expanding fossil fuel industry, and they are busily organizing a series of week-long climate convergences across the US this summer.²⁸

A new movement is emerging, but clearly has a way to go before it can meaningfully counter the dual obstacles of global warming denial on one hand, and nominally well-meaning but counterproductive policy measures on the other. Several elements clearly need to come together in order for a genuine popular movement for Climate Justice to take shape. Such an agenda would likely have at least four central elements:

1. Highlight the social justice implications of global climate disruptions. Global warming is not just a scientific issue, and it's

not mainly about measuring parts per million of carbon dioxide or saving polar bears. As the UN's Human Development Report described so eloquently, global warming is a social justice issue, and people in the global South are already facing severe consequences from increased droughts, wildfires and major floods. Bringing home these implications can go a long way toward humanizing the problem and raise the urgency of global action.

2. Dramatize the links between US climate and energy policies and US military adventures, particularly the war in Iraq, which is without question the most grotesquely energy-wasting activity on the planet today. Last October, people gathered under the banner of "No War, No Warming" blocked the entrances to a Congressional office building in Washington, demanding an end to the war and real steps to prevent more catastrophic climate changes. Similar actions across the country could go a long way toward raising the pressure on politicians who say the right things about global warming and blithely vote for business as usual.

3. Expose the numerous false solutions to global warming promoted by the world's elites, particularly the subsidized expansion of nuclear power and agrofuels. Carbon trading and offsets are promoted in Washington as the only politically expedient way to reduce emissions, but we know they are structurally incapable of doing so. We need mandated emissions reductions, a tax on industrial scale carbon dioxide production, requirements to reorient utility and transportation policies, public funds for solar and wind energy, and large reductions in energy consumption, especially in the industrialized world. Buying more "green" products won't do; we need to consume less!

4. Envision a new, lower-consumption world of decentralized, clean energy and politically empowered communities. Like the antinuclear activists of 30 years ago, who halted the first wave of nuclear power in the US, while articulating an inspiring vision of directly democratic, solar-powered communities, we again need to dramatize the positive, even utopian, possibilities for a post-petroleum, post-mega-mall world. The technologies already exist for a locally-controlled, solar-based alternative, at the same time that dissatisfaction with today's high consumption, high debt "American way of life" appears to be at an all time high. Small experiments in living more locally, while improving the quality of life, are thriving everywhere. So are experiments in community-controlled renewable energy production.

There is no shortage of feasible technological solutions to excessive energy consumption and the need to rapidly curtail the use of fossil fuels. Thirty years ago, energy analyst Amory Lovins began to demonstrate the feasibility of dramatically increased energy efficiency. His work over the past three decades has demonstrated in exhaustive detail how we can reduce energy consumption by 60 – 80 percent, and that many of the necessary measures would result in an unambiguous economic gain.²⁹ New, innovative technologies for saving energy and replacing fossil fuels are announced almost daily.

Today, more than ever, the obstacles are entirely social and political. Corporations generally will not invest in measures to save energy and make their operations more efficient unless they can demonstrate a two year payback—a constraint that is not imposed on any other type of investment.³⁰ Further, we now have the most inequitable distribution of wealth since the period just before the Great Depression of the 1930s; the occupation of Iraq has cost the US and its allies over \$3 trillion over the past five years, according to Nobel economics laureate Joseph Stiglitz. Public funds are squandered on projects and tax measures that benefit the few at the expense of the many, while our society's contribution to climate catastrophe continues to mount.

Global warming can represent a future of deprivation and scarcity for all but the world's wealthiest, or this global emergency can compel us to imagine a radically transformed society—both in the North and the South—where communities of people are newly empowered to remake their own future. The crisis can drive us to break free from a predatory global economy that fabulously enriches the top tenth of one percent, while leaving the rest of us scrambling after the crumbs. The reality is too urgent, and the outlook far too bleak, to settle for status-quo false solutions that only appear to be addressing the urgency of global climate disruption.

We can embrace the reconstructive potential of a radically ecological social and political vision, prevent catastrophe, and

begin to make our way toward a fundamentally different kind of future. In practical terms, real solutions to global warming, as Van Jones of San Francisco's Ella Baker Center, points out, are far more likely to benefit our inner cities and put millions of people to work installing decentralized, energy-saving technologies. In the longer term, Al Gore is correct when he emphasizes that political will is the main obstacle to addressing global warming, but we also need to be able to look beyond the status-quo and be willing to struggle for a radically different kind of world.

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Notes:

1 The emerging conflict between technocratic environmentalism and social ecology was first explored by social ecologist Murray Bookchin in the 1970s; several of his essays from that period are compiled in his *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980, now available from AK Press).

2 The various IPCC reports, and condensed summaries aimed toward policymakers, can be downloaded from <http://www.ipcc.ch>.

3 Reported in James Hansen, et al., "Climate change and trace gases," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society, Part A*, Vol. 365, pp. 1925-1954 (2007), and James Hansen, et al., "Target Atmospheric CO₂: Where Should Humanity Aim?" (unpublished manuscript), available from http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2008/TargetCO2_20080407.pdf.

4 The IPCC's conclusions in this and subsequent paragraphs are from their Working Group II Report, titled "Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability," and available from <http://www.ipcc.ch>.

5 IPCC Working Group II Report, p. 393.

6 World Resources Institute, *Synthesis: Ecosystems and Human Well-Being, A Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005.

7 Human Development Report 2007/2008: *Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, United Nations Development Program, 2007, p. 16.

8 See, for example, Ernest Waititu "Drought Spurs Resource Wars," Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, reprinted in *The Independent* (NYC), No. 119, April 25, 2008.

9 Dan Smith and Janani Vivekananda, *A Climate of Conflict: The links between climate change, peace and war*, London: International Alert, November 2007, p. 3.

10 Rafael Reuveny, "Climate change-induced migration and violent conflict," *Political Geography* Vol. 26, pp. 656-673, 2007.

11 Michael T. Klare, "The Pentagon vs. Peak Oil: How Wars of the Future May Be Fought Just to Run the Machines That Fight Them," at <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174810>.

12 Human Development Report, op. cit., p. 27.

13 See, for example, Jan Willem Storm van Leeuwen and Philip Smith, *Nuclear Power: The Energy Balance*, available from <http://www.stormsmith.nl>.

14 See, for example, the *Agrofuels Special Issue of Seedling*, published in Barcelona by the international research group GRAIN, July 2007, available from grain.org.

15 It is estimated that up to 30% of current food price increases are attributable to the diversion of food grains toward agrofuel production. See, for example, Eric Holt-Giménez and Isabella Kenfield, "When Renewable Isn't Sustainable: Agrofuels and the Inconvenient Truths Behind the 2007 U.S. Energy Independence and Security Act," Oakland, CA: Food First, 2008.

16 Lester R. Brown, "Supermarkets and Service Stations Now Competing for Grain," Earth Policy Institute Update, July 13, 2006, at <http://www.earth-policy.org/Updates/2006/Update55.htm>.

17 Jason Hill, et al., "Environmental, economic, and energetic costs and benefits of biodiesel and ethanol biofuels," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Vol. 103 no. 30, pp. 11206 -11210, July 25, 2006.

18 For an early overview, see Biofuels: Renewable Energy or Environmental Disaster in the Making? London: Biofuelwatch, 2006, at www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/biofuel_paper.pdf.

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