

Position Statement on Climate Change



North Carolina Environmental Justice Network

<http://www.ncejn.org/>

Preamble

The first calculation relating human emissions of carbon dioxide to global warming was made in 1896 [1]. By the 1980s, evidence of the role of humans in global warming was strong enough for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to form under the auspices of the United Nations. Since then the climate action movement has been dominated by organizations that focus on environmental preservation rather than human welfare and social justice. For example, the mission statements of one organization's top five ranked nonprofits working on climate change (National Resources Defense Council, 350.org, Union of Concerned Scientists, Sierra Club and World Resources Institute) boast goals such as, "safeguard the Earth; preserve our planet; protect the wild places of the earth; and protect Earth's environment" [2]. These laudable goals are usually promoted in the absence of primary engagement with colonialism, imperialism, militarism, racism, sexism, exploitation of labor, and much of the human population's lack of access to basic public health amenities.

The lack of historical engagement of mainstream environmental groups with issues of social justice, and the relative absence of people of color in their leadership, has led many of these groups to reach out to environmental justice groups that are rooted in civil rights, human rights and labor struggles, to broaden their base beyond relatively privileged white people. These mainstream groups often want the support of low income people and people of color without

providing reciprocal commitment to struggles for social and economic justice. The North Carolina Environmental Justice Network, a coalition of grassroots organizations led by African Americans, developed the following statement to explain its position on climate change to predominantly white environmental groups.

Statement on Climate Change

The Earth is experiencing climate change characterized by more extreme weather and global warming. Storms, droughts, flooding, melting of glaciers, and sea level rise are already affecting people in many regions. Increasingly, water and food supplies and other systems necessary for human survival will be affected. Sea level rise will cause massive migration and loss of some of the world's major cities. These threats could trigger famines, epidemics, and wars.

Climate change is propelled by greenhouse gases from fossil fuels used in transportation, agriculture, industry, and power generation, as well as carbon and methane from deforestation, livestock production, and solid waste disposal. Reductions in greenhouse gas emissions are imperative for sustaining the planet's life-support systems and for slowing mass extinction due to loss of habitat on land and in the oceans.

Underdeveloped countries and communities exposed to racial and class exploitation are more vulnerable to climate change than wealthy countries and communities. Additionally, within underdeveloped communities, the elderly, the chronically ill, and people with disabilities are especially vulnerable. This makes climate change an environmental justice issue. The injustice of disproportionate impact is magnified by the fact that people with fewer material resources are less responsible for producing greenhouse gases than wealthy people, many of whom argue that low-income people should not use resources in the way wealthy people do.

In the past few decades, climate change has become a rallying cry for environmentalists. The climate change movement is composed mostly of white, privileged people who did not object to fossil fuels as long as they themselves were not directly impacted. In the past, most of these groups have been silent as communities of color and low income suffered the brunt of droughts, floods, and heat waves. Mainstream environmental groups did not step in to protest the pollution of communities living next to refineries, pipelines, and chemical plants; they did not fight for workers exposed daily to injuries, crippling dusts, carcinogens, and periodically to catastrophic and fatal accidents such as the Deepwater Horizon disaster, refinery explosions, and coal mine collapses.

Now that fossil fuels threaten everybody, many white, privileged people support action against climate change. This movement is important; however, it will not succeed if it only involves people of privilege. Major change, and especially change that advances justice, comes from the bottom up more than from the top down. In the case of reducing greenhouse gases, change requires re-structuring the global economy and abandoning production of fossil fuels that are currently counted as part of the assets of global energy companies.

NCEJN is not in a position to compete directly with large industries and environmental organizations that influence policy through lobbyists and campaign contributions. Our potential lies in contributing to a mass mobilization for justice. NCEJN was created to partner with communities experiencing injustice to transform power relationships and bring about self-determination. Our partner communities face immediate threats of polluted homes, lack of basic amenities that the government provides to others, exploitative working conditions, language barriers, lack of access to services, and racist treatment in housing, education, and policing. To involve communities that are being and will be most severely impacted by climate change in the

climate change movement, we must address the everyday concerns that people face right now. Anything less would be unethical as well as ineffective. Slowing greenhouse gas emissions cannot occur without a mass movement, and it must be a movement that puts justice first. NCEJN is focused on building that movement.

We are not fighting for a new order that reduces greenhouse emissions but leaves other injustices in place. NCEJN especially opposes reducing greenhouse gases in ways that magnify existing environmental injustices. Although neighborhood “smart growth” can reduce fuel consumption by locating homes near jobs, shops, and schools, these benefits perpetuate injustice when wealthy developments displace low-income communities and reinforce racial segregation. On a regional scale, “cap-and-trade” would limit total carbon emissions by allowing reduced pollution in wealthy areas to be offset by continued pollution in low-income areas. NCEJN recognizes that environmental injustice itself is a driving force behind climate change: by polluting low-income communities instead of their own, the wealthy have less incentive to reduce pollution.

NCEJN seeks to offer a broader analysis of the political and economic roots of the environmental problems we face. Climate change is a symptom of global capitalism, just like fever is a symptom of infection. Treating climate change as the fundamental issue is like practicing medicine in the era before germs were identified as the causes of infection. Cold compresses may help a fever, but they do not treat infection. Because fossil fuel is the lifeblood of the global economy, the climate justice movement must engage with the infection – capitalism – and not just the fever, climate change. Treating the symptoms will not prevent disaster or alleviate environmental injustice. To treat the infection we have to build a movement that is

inclusive, which requires putting racial and economic justice and self-determination first. Our job is to bring this environmental justice perspective to our allies and the communities we serve.

References

1. American Institute of Physics, 2015, <https://www.aip.org/history/climate/timeline.htm>, accessed December 28, 2015.
2. Philanthropedia, 2012, <http://www.myphilanthropedia.org/top-nonprofits/national/climate-change/2012>, accessed December 28, 2015.