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“Clean Coal” Con Job
Greenwashing an environmental disaster won’t solve the climate crisis

BY STEPHEN KUNZ AND MICHAEL NIXON

Being told you should support “clean coal” sounds like motherhood and apple pie, but it’s intentionally misleading. Unfortunately, “clean coal” is like those “healthy cigarettes” the tobacco industry advertised in the 1950s: there’s no such thing.

The dirty truth is that coal must still be ripped from underground or stripped off the earth’s surface, processed and transported by train or truck. Then it’s burned, producing large volumes of toxic wastes, some of which escape into the air and water, and gigantic heaps of which are hidden away out of the view of most of the public. While coal is currently a non-renewable fossil fuel that primarily contains carbon, along with a host of other elements and heavy metals, many of them quite toxic even in tiny amounts. These include mercury, arsenic, lead, chromium, selenium, and molybdenum, as well as some radioactive isotopes. The burning of fossil fuels produces more than 21 billion tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) each year, yet it is estimated that the earth’s natural processes can only absorb about half of that amount, so at the present rate of coal mining and burning there is a net increase of more than 10 billion tons of atmospheric CO₂ per year. In the United States, more than 90% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the combustion of fossil fuels.

To address global warming concerns, the Obama administration is focusing on

About half the electricity generated in the United States is produced by coal-fired power plants.

Coal Never Comes Clean
Coal-burning power plants currently produce about half of the electricity generated in the United States. Most of that
From the Editor’s Desk

BY CHRISTY PARDEW

On the heels of a large demonstration at a Washington, DC coal power plant and an enormous gathering of students at a climate change conference, this issue of the RESIST Newsletter focuses on the environment.

Over 12,000 students came together in February for Power Shift ’09, the largest youth gathering on climate change in U.S. history. Students from high schools and colleges in all fifty states and all Canadian provinces met and strategized about organizing for an energy revolution.

The Capital Climate Action capped off the conference weekend when over 2,500 activists massed on the Capitol Hill Power Plant, which still uses coal to heat and cool several key federal buildings. Activists ringed the building and blocked the plant’s five main gates for four hours on Monday, March 2.

The burgeoning clean energy movement celebrated a victory earlier this year when Bank of America announced they would no longer fund mountaintop removal, the controversial coal extraction method that involves blasting the tops off of mountains and scraping the rubble into adjacent valleys, filling streambeds and polluting ecosystems. In recent years, Bank of America facilitated hundreds of millions of dollars in loans to companies that are involved in mountaintop removal coal mining. In December, the bank said it would change its policy in response to public pressure led by environmental groups.

Despite victories like these and growing concern for global warming, reports earlier this year indicated that climate researchers have found worldwide carbon emissions have grown sharply since 2000. During the 1990s, carbon emissions grew by less than one percent per year, but since 2000, emissions have grown at a rate of 3.5 percent per year. From 2000 to 2008, no part of the world had a decline in emissions.

Climate scientist Christopher Field says the largest factor in this increase is the widespread adoption of coal as an energy source. During the Obama campaign, we heard a lot about “clean coal” technology. RESIST grantee Citizens Coal Council, a grassroots group that protects people and the environment from coal mining damage, says “clean coal” is a myth in their article, “Clean Coal’ Con Job” (page 1).

Coal showed a dirty face in December of last year when 1.1 billion gallons of coal ash sludge spilled from a Tennessee coal plant’s containment pond, flooding homes and water sources. The Tennessee Valley Authority, owner of the plant, has said it may take years and cost over $800 million to clean up the massive spill.

RESIST grantee United Mountain Defense is offering front line support to people and communities affected by spill. In their article “A Tsunami of Toxic Coal Sludge” (page 5), they detail the spill and its aftermath and the struggles facing people now as they attempt to determine levels of contamination in their water, environment and bodies.

The Global Justice Ecology Project, another RESIST grantee, gives us an overview of where we stand nationally on environmental issues in their article, “Obama’s New Green Deal” (page 4). President Obama’s talk on the environment sounded good on the campaign trail, but how is it playing out in his Cabinet appointments and first 100 days in office?

Climate change is one of the most important crises facing us today. As the world’s largest contributor to greenhouse gases, the U.S. has a unique responsibility to step out and embrace alternative energy sources while dramatically cutting our greenhouse gas emissions. This issue of the Newsletter has the power to move us toward action.

Christy Pardew
Newsletter Editor.
the development of clean energy alternatives, and Ol' King Coal is looking to get in on the action and stay in the game. By carefully avoiding the key "renewable" aspect and focusing instead on the word "clean," advocates of coal are green-washing the truth, trying to turn old black into the new green.

But when mountaintops are being blown away and lush valleys filled with rubble, when farm fields, streams, and wetlands are being undermined, subdivided, and dried up, and when homes and communities are literally being shaken and broken apart, it's hard to view any coal process as clean. Of course, that is not what the coal companies, some politicians, and other coal supporters mean when they talk about "clean coal." They intentionally don't talk about the extraction and processing parts. What they prefer to talk about is the burning part.

Even when the focus is on burning, however, "clean coal" means different things to different people. Sometimes it simply means "cleaner" - cleaner than it was 25, or even 10, years ago. By any measure, coal plants are filthy. Although newer coal plant smokestack emissions may be cleaner-emitting than older ones because of stricter air quality standards and smokestack air-scrubbing technology, they are still orders of magnitude dirtier than wind or solar power systems. And even the latest low-emission coal plants, which limit most of the sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxide emissions, do not stop making any carbon dioxide - the coal-burning by-product that is the chief culprit in global warming.

Furthermore, the air-scrubbing process of "cleaning" the smokestack emissions only causes the dirty coal components to be collected and concentrated into massive piles of coal combustion wastes (CCW), including mass quantities of toxic coal ash. Those coal burning wastes must then be disposed of, usually in gigantic piles and impoundments that can tower hundreds of feet into the air, over hundreds of acres, posing health threats in myriad of other serious ways, including landslides such as the one that occurred recently into a tributary of the Tennessee River in Harriman, Tennessee.

(See "A Tsunami of Toxic Coal Sludge" on page 5.)

Despite their hazardous nature, coal combustion wastes still are not subject to federal regulation, and state laws governing coal combustion waste disposal are usually weak or non-existent. Many of them actually promote the dumping of CCW and coal ash as a "beneficial use." How Orwellian! Beware the industry practice of using nice words to re-characterize bad things.

The Coal Industry's Latest Fast-Talk

Most promoters of "clean coal" technology are referring to carbon sequestration, or carbon capture and storage (CCS). This is a theoretical process whereby the carbon dioxide from coal burning that would be emitted to the atmosphere might otherwise somehow be captured and permanently stored underground. It sounds too good to be true - because it is! Some independent parts that would comprise the proposed CCS process have been successfully operated, but they haven't been used together in any large-scale project. Currently, only three experimental carbon sequestration projects are under way (one in Saskatchewan, one in Algeria, and one in the North Sea), and none is actually linked to generating electricity.

The capture part isn't too difficult, although capturing and compressing CO₂ is very energy-intensive, increasing the fuel needs of a coal-fired plant with CCS by 25%-40%. It's the storage part that is much more theory than reality. After capture, the CO₂ must be pressurized into a superfluid, piped to a suitable storage site and then injected deep underground into a geological formation secure enough to prevent leakage or migration into groundwater or to the surface and the atmosphere. The nuclear industry has been trying for decades to design safe and secure underground waste storage, without success. The coal industry is doing no better.

Early in 2008, after spending $500 million, the U.S. Department of Energy pulled its support for the industry-sponsored "FutureGen" project in Illinois, blaming cost estimates that had ballooned to $1.8 billion, nearly double the original price tag of just five years earlier. On top of technical difficulties, the uncertainty surrounding the long-term integrity and security of underground storage areas makes the insurance liability costs staggering. Now the coal industry wants state and federal taxpayers to insure these experimental and dangerous projects and to hold the coal industry blameless for any disasters and damage that would happen. Just this past month, such a proposal was introduced in Pennsylvania's General Assembly. That extreme bill was resoundingly decried by citizens' groups across the Commonwealth, including the Sierra Club and Clean Water Action.

No matter how "clean" the burning of coal and the disposal of its waste may supposedly become (and even the coal industry admits it will take at least 10 to 15 years and at least $17 billion in today's dollars), the extraction of coal is still an environmental disaster, one which seems to be immune from the regulatory safeguards that govern all other industrial activities. And the prospect of a cap or tax on carbon makes prudent investors nervous about the long-term prospects.
Obama's New Green Deal
Are we seeing a sign of change or the same old story?

BY ANNE PETERMAN

Much of the world breathed a collective sigh of relief when the poll results rolled in confirming the election of Barack Obama as the new President of the United States. Gone was the pugilistic Bush Dynasty with its shoot-first diplomacy, its neo-con artists and its barely comprehensible, beady-eyed figurehead.

In its stead, a seemingly genuine, straight-talking and thoughtful man who claimed he stood for change. With him came a million or more activists, some brand new, some vastly experienced, who helped to put him there. "Yes we can!" became the slogan for this new generation of believers in the American Dream, an "America" that had once again become something the world could put their trust in.

Or so it seemed.

The Honeymoon was short. As Obama began to assemble his Cabinet, his true allegiances became all too apparent.

The first in this parade of disappointments was Obama's preliminary pick of Larry Summers, one of his top economic advisors, for the job of Treasury Secretary. While Chief Economist for the World Bank, Summers made the outrageous claim that Africa was "under-polluted." He reasoned that since Africans had such a significantly shorter life-span, it stood to reason that more dirty industries should be encouraged to relocate there. While the highly controversial Summers was not ultimately chosen for the Treasury job, his selection raises concerns.

On the environment, Obama's choices have also been terrible. His new choice for Director of the EPA, Lisa Jackson, is coming under fire from PEER (Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility). PEER asserts that when she was Director of New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection, Jackson was responsible for appointing industry people to key positions, suppressing science and covering up toxic contamination.

Under the banner of "renewable energy," Obama has hand-picked Cabinet members known for their support for large-scale, destructive biofuels (called agrofuels by critics). These include Tom Vilsack (Secretary of Agriculture), known for his advocacy on behalf of biotechnology and his close relationship with Monsanto and support for corn ethanol; Ken Salazar (Secretary of the Interior) who has been a major proponent of flex-fuel car production and cellulosic fuel development; and Steven Chu (Secretary of Energy) who was instrumental in establishing agrofuels as the major focus of Lawrence Berkeley Labs, which he directs.

US forests in trouble

The so-called second generation cellulosic agrofuels - biofuel made from wood, grasses or other non-edible parts of plants - being promoted by Obama's team are driving the development of genetically engineered (GE) trees, specifically designed to more easily transform into liquid fuels. Only recently, ArborGen, a leading GE tree developer, submitted a request for deregulation of a GE eucalyptus tree, planned for huge plantations across the U.S. South, specifically to feed future agrofuel facilities.

The impact of the escape of GE trees and their traits into our forests coupled with the massive new demand for wood that would accompany the manufacture of liquid fuels from trees (on top of the already growing demand for wood for traditional uses such as paper), will drive massive deforestation in forests all over the world, including right here in the U.S. With Ken Salazar as the head of the Interior Department (that oversees our national parks) and Tom Vilsack as the Secretary of Agriculture (that oversees our national forests), U.S. forests could be in serious trouble.

As it turns out, in Obama's "new green deal," the green stands for money, as the deal emphasizes financial incentives and support for notoriously destructive corporations that are pushing agrofuels and other false solutions to climate change. These false solutions, which also include so-called "green nukes" (as they have been called by VP Joe Biden), and the insanely oxymoronic "clean coal," signify a difficult road ahead for those of us committed to finding and implement real, effective and just solutions to climate change.

Kyoto and international pressure

What about international action on climate change? Will Obama finally "join the world" and sign onto the Kyoto Protocol global warming agreement? I predict yes. Not, however, because of a commitment to tackle the climate problem, but because the climate change debate at the international level has ceased to be about finding solutions to the climate crisis, and has become one more way to maximize profits - another form of "disaster capitalism." As someone who has walked the halls of the world's greatest "carbon trade fair" since 2004, I have seen the UN
A Tsunami of Toxic Coal Sludge
Tennessee spill threatens people, communities and environment

BY MATT LANDON AND BONNIE SWINFORD

On December 22, 2008, a toxic tsunami hit Harriman, Tennessee. 1.6 billion gallons of coal waste flooded a residential area, the largest environmental disaster of its kind in the United States. The catastrophe occurred when an earthen dike at the Tennessee Valley Authority’s Kingston Fossil Plant collapsed and 10 times more sludge than was spilled by the Exxon Valdez flooded a quiet, lakefront community. Toxic coal waste covered 400 acres of land and rose 65 feet into the air before the earthen dam burst.

The sludge at Kingston had been accumulating for half a century. The mountain of waste covered more than 100 acres and was spilled by the Exxon Valdez flooded only by earthen dikes. Environmentalists have long argued that coal ash, which can contaminate groundwater and poison aquatic environments, should be stored in lined landfills. Most coal plants around the country are located near rivers that supply the water they need to operate, and they usually store coal ash in unlined ponds. In some areas coal ash is recycled as fill material.

The components of fly ash vary, but all fly ash includes substantial amounts of silicon dioxide and calcium oxide. Toxic constituents include arsenic, beryllium, boron, cadmium, chromium, chromium VI, cobalt, lead, manganese, mercury, molybdenum, selenium, strontium, thallium, and vanadium, along with dioxins and PAH compounds.

In the past, fly ash was usually released into the atmosphere in the coal burning process, but pollution control equipment mandated in recent decades now require that it be captured prior to release. In the US, fly ash is generally stored at coal power plants or placed in landfills.

From the first day of the disaster, local residents have questioned how TVA will clean up the mess. There has been heavy criticism of cleanup efforts. The TVA and Environmental Protection Agency initially estimated that the spill released 1.7 million cubic yards of sludge, but after an aerial survey, the official estimate was more than tripled to 5.4 million cubic yards. The spill covered surrounding land with up to six feet of sludge. The EPA first estimated that the spill would take four to six weeks to clean up, but in an interview with CNN, Chandra Taylor, staff attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, said the cleanup could take months and possibly years.

People living near the disaster area continue to deal with trucks tracking coal ash through the community, excessive blasting from a nearby rock quarry, loud machinery working at all hours, ongoing roadblocks, and TVA police vehicles and helicopters invading their community. Many people are skeptical that TVA will live up to their promises of cleaning this up the right way.

Many impacted community members are worried about the lasting environmental impacts to the water and land – and air as the coal ash is drying out and becoming windborne. Many do not trust TVA’s assurance that the coal ash is nothing to worry about. The cleanup could take years.

continued on page six
try's phony "clean coal" marketing cam­
be directly related to the disaster; many
of these people, however, are trapped in

The Path to a Bright Future is Not
Illuminated

I need to focus on
Making coal producers and users pay the
real costs involved in properly managing
its extraction, use and the toxic wastes
it causes.

Sure, coal is here and available, but it
is finite in supply. And coal is touted by

the industry as a "cheap" energy source
because the industry has been able to
avoid internalizing the full true costs of
coal—both to people's health and our
environment—from the people affected
and the places damaged pay the price
ever.

Energy from the sun is even more
widely available and virtually infinite.
After all, without the sun, electric power
supply is the least of our worries. Wind
ergy is available, and its green-ness
can be very good as long as it's thought­
fully located so as not to disrupt natural
processes, wildlife and special places.
Tidal and wave energy is available, and
its sustainability likewise is relative to its
sitting. If we are going to invest resources
and money developing new energy tech­
nologies, they shouldn't be ones that rely
on a limited supply of carbon-based fuel,
tear up the earth, destroy clean water
aquifers and drinking water and pollute
streams on a massive scale.

continued from page six

worry about and that the air and water are
safe. Independent testing of water and ash
samples have shown high levels of arse­
nic, radium and other heavy metals. By
monitoring and providing independent
lab results, UMD hopes to motivate the

Tennessee Valley Authority and the Envi­
enmental Protection Agency to conduct
more testing and to become more open
and transparent with their own tests and
protocols, providing for the needs of the
people impacted by this disaster.

UMD is working with residents to
run a citizen's air monitoring program in
coordination with the Global Community
Monitor. This is a simple but effective

tool that will allow the community to
find out what is in the air. The program
includes testing for seven different heavy
metals and particulate matter small
enough to enter a person's bloodstream
from their lungs.

There are many men, women and chil­
dren who are experiencing adverse health
problems which their doctors believe to
be directly related to the disaster; many
of these people, however, are trapped in
this polluted environment with no help in
sight. Many residents told UMD that they
were interested in being tested for heavy
metal exposure, and UMD arranged
several toxicity testing clinics for full
body heavy metal analyses. UMD hopes
to raise more money to continue to offer
free bio-monitoring as the number and
severity of health concerns grow.

Since day one, there has been an effort
to record TVA's clean-up and communi­
cation efforts. UMD has more than sixty
hours of film and is working to compile
the most comprehensive video documenta­
tion of the disaster by obtaining more
equipment and editing capabilities.

Coal is filthy, from the extraction pro­
cess which blows up mountains and de­
strs watersheds, to ignition that plagues
our air quality, to the waste disposal that
can devastate whole communities in one
fatal swoop.

Matt Landon is a full-time volun­
tee staffperson at United Mountain
Defense, and Bonnie Swinford serves
on UMD's Board of Directors. UMD
works to halt the destructive practices
of mountaintop removal coal mining and is a RESIST grantee.

"Clean Coal" Con Job

continued from page three

of using the most carbon-intensive fos­
sil fuel.

The Path to a Bright Future is Not
Illuminated by Coal

The devious intent of the coal indus­
try's phony "clean coal" marketing cam­
paign is to justify the continued purchase
and wide-spread use of coal for hundreds
more years. Of course we won't be able
to stop using coal all at once. What we
have to stop doing right now, though, is
wasting any more of the world's limited
research money trying to develop "clean
coal" technologies, CCS, or anything that
would rely on the future use of coal on
these scales. We also need to focus on
making coal producers and users pay the
real costs involved in properly managing
its extraction, use and the toxic wastes
it causes.

So what's the answer?

In January, the British magazine New
Scientist covered a new report about
alternative energy. According to this
Stanford University study carried out by
Marc Jacobson, the U.S. could replace
all its cars and trucks with electric cars
powered by wind turbines taking up less
than two square miles.

The study ranked 11 types of non­
fove fuels according to their total
ecological footprint and their benefit
to human health, and it found wind
power to be the most desirable source
of energy—by far.

The energy sources that Jacobson
found most promising were, in descend­
ing order:

• Wind
• Concentrated solar power
• Geothermal energy
• Tidal energy
• Solar panels
• Wave energy
• Hydroelectric dams

To compare the energy sources,
Jacobson calculated the impacts each
would have if it alone powered the entire
US fleet of cars and trucks. Jacobson
considered the quantities of greenhouse
gases that would be emitted by each
fuel, and he also considered the envi­
nronmental impact each fuel would have
—how much land it would take up and if
it would pollute water, for example.

Biofuels from corn and plant waste
came right at the bottom of the list,
along with nuclear power and "clean
coal."

"The energy alternatives that are
good are not the ones that people have
been talking about the most," says
Jacobson. "Ethanol-based biofuels will
actually cause more harm to human
health, wildlife, water supply and land
use than current fossil fuels."

Jacobson says it would take 30
times more space to grow enough corn
to power the US fleet than would be
needed to erect enough wind turbines,
while bioethanol would produce more
greenhouse gases than wind power.

"The philosophy that we should try
a little bit of everything is wrong," says
Jacobson. "We need to focus on the
technologies that provide the best ben­
efit. We know which these are."

Source: New Scientist, January 14, 2009
Climate Conventions become completely subordinated to the goals of big business and the whims of the market. Trade in carbon has become the latest financial bubble, and American businesses want their share of the pie. That they also get to paint themselves green in the process is a very nice bonus. In signing onto an ineffectual and thoroughly undermined international climate treaty, Obama will likewise get a nice feather in his cap, helping to deflect the criticisms of his detractors who want the U.S. to take real, effective and just action on climate change.

So is all hope lost already? No. The most positive outcome of the election of Obama was not the man himself, but the huge upsurge in optimism and the belief in our collective power to make change. As Noam Chomsky and others have pointed out, real change does not come from the top. Real changes must be forced from below — by powerful grassroots movements. So once again, real change lies in our own hands. The incredible energy that helped put Obama into power is now going to have to take up the challenge of holding him accountable.

The climate crisis is one of the most important issues facing us today. The international movement for climate justice is counting on the U.S. movement to be the force for real, effective and just action on climate change. We have a prime opportunity to take up this challenge this year. The Mobilization for Climate Justice, a national alliance of organizations from all around the country, was recently founded with the express purpose of mobilizing action on climate in the U.S. In December of this year, the UN Climate Convention will meet in Copenhagen to finalize the details of the new international climate agreement that will succeed the Kyoto Protocol when it expires in 2012. The world is drawing the line here. Mobilizations in the U.S. are being planned for that month, coming ten years after the WTO shutdown in Seattle.

The U.S. has a special historic responsibility to take real, effective and just action on climate change as both the leading contributor of greenhouse gas emissions and the number one obstacle to effective action at the international level (under both Democrats and Republicans).

We must both confront the false climate solutions being promoted by the Obama Administration, and demand real, effective and just solutions. At the same time we must support those efforts at the grassroots level — the small-scale, locally controlled solutions to climate change — that are already occurring.

After all, as the saying goes, we are the change we want to see.

Anne Peterman is the Executive Director of the Global Justice Ecology Project, a RESIST grantee in Vermont.

“Clean Coal” Con Job

Localized and residential-scale wind and solar installations provide great promise and are slowly being installed all over the world today. Our government needs to provide more support to those technologies, rather than looking to perpetuate the now-dysfunctional 19th century models of burning coal and having centralized regional power plants with their massive, complex, and expensive distribution systems.

Remember: There is no such thing as “clean coal” or “clean coal technology.” It’s the green-washing fast-talk of a dirty old business. They may have conned some politicians, but don’t let them con you — or your children.

Stephen P. Kunz is a Senior Ecologist at Schmid & Co, Inc and serves on the Citizens Coal Council (CCC) Longwall Mining Committee. Michael V. Nixon, J.D., is the Litigation Chair for the CCC, a grassroots citizens group that protects people, homes, water, communities and the environment from coal mining damage. CCC is a RESIST grantee in southwestern Pennsylvania.
RESIST awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in organizing for social, economic and racial justice. In this issue of the Newsletter we list a few grant recipients from our most recent allocation cycle in February of 2009. For more information, visit the RESIST website at www.resistinc.org or contact the groups directly.

**Justice Committee**  
P.O. Box 1885, New York, New York 10159, www.thejusticecommittee.org

A Latino/Latina-led New York Organization, the Justice Committee is working against police violence and systemic racism. Originally founded in 1983 as the NYC chapter of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, the Justice Committee has expanded its work to counter all police violence and to build a movement against systemic racism.

A RESIST grant of $3,000 will support the Justice Committee’s radical, community-based work across New York City.

**People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER)**  
P.O. Box 6327, Austin, Texas 78762.  
www.poder-texas.org

PODER works to redefine environmental issues as social and economic justice issues. Founded by a group of Chicano/a East Austin organizers in 1991, PODER has shut down a dirty power plant, conducted health surveys and worked to protect the East Austin community from environmental hazards.

A grant of $2,500 will aid PODER in increasing the participation of people of color in corporate and government decision-making related to their neighborhoods.

**Topeka Center for Peace & Justice**  
1248 SW Buchanan Street, Topeka, Kansas 66604, www.topekacpj.org

The Topeka Center for Peace and Justice promotes justice and peace through education and action in and around Topeka, Kansas. Guided by the principles of Restorative Justice, TCP&J established a mediation center, runs a peace camp for youth, works for economic justice and facilitates the Veritas Voices Choir, made up of incarcerated women and area volunteers.

RESIST’s grant of $2,000 will help the Topeka Center for Peace and Justice continue its innovative work to create a more just world.

**VOICES**  

VOICES is a grassroots, membership-driven organization made up of low-income people and others who care about the issues affecting people who need social services. VOICES members partner with the University of Washington’s social work program to train future social workers with a radical social analysis and have successfully advocated for ten legislative bills to improve health care and housing for low-income and poor people in Washington.

A $3,000 grant from RESIST will enable VOICES to continue building a powerful poor people’s movement for change in Washington.