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Why “Good Liberals” Won’t Save the Climate



Climate justice communities blockade corporate greenwash. Photo via Brook Anderson.

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

–Martin Luther King Jr.

We’ve known for a long time not to believe the false rhetoric of “good liberals” like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Jerry Brown. In rare moments, we’re able to draw a

stark contrast between them telling us that they “feel our pain” and the harsh reality their policies have on our communities.

Last month, in downtown San Francisco, California Gov. Jerry Brown attempted define his legacy of “real climate leadership” with the Global Climate Action Summit (GCAS). With GCAS, Brown provided an opportunity for governors, mayors, corporate lobbyists and the environmental non-profit industrial complex to network, hobnob and announce major initiatives for climate action. The ultimate goal was to contrast the climate initiatives of “good liberals,” like Brown, to the climate denial politics of the Trump White House. The CEOs of SalesForce, Kaiser and Unilever, as well as AFL-CIO president Richard Trumfka celebrities like actor Harrison Ford and musician Dave Matthews, and of course, Al Gore showed up to promote a business friendly climate agenda to the world. Technology and profit driven solutions were the planet-saving theme of the week. Crowds of adoring greens, many the staff of the nation’s liberal environmental non-profit complex, cheered when Brown announced that California would put its own satellite to monitor climate change into the atmosphere. Financial firms committed to fund climate action to the tune of \$32 billion. Cities committed to go carbon neutral by 2045. Companies committed to rapidly shift to renewable energy. Billionaire and former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg joined Brown in denouncing Trump for pulling the U.S. out of the Paris Climate Accords. As noted by many observers, it, in fact, was a boring trade show where governments and corporations showed up to market their ideas and products.

“Stand with Communities, Not Corporations”

Outside the summit things got much more interesting. All week, frontline, Indigenous and grassroots activists had a massive presence outside a number of official GCAS events. It began over the weekend with a 30,000 person march that weaved through the streets of San Francisco culminating in a giant art project that painted dozens of street murals at the city’s Civic Center area. It continued Monday morning with a confrontational action at the Governor’s Task Force on Forests and Climate (GCF) meeting as the body met to further schemes such as reduced emissions from deforestation and land use (REDD+). On Wednesday, local campaign “No Coal in Oakland,” fighting to stop a proposed coal campaign at the Port of Oakland, picketed outside the United Nations Principles of Responsible Investment meeting that included the Bank of Montreal, a prominent funder of the proposal.

The biggest action of the week, “Stand with Communities, Not Corporations,” culminated on the first official day of the summit outside its entrances at the Moscone Center in

downtown San Francisco. The action was led by local Bay Area Indigenous group Idle No More SF Bay, a coalition of environmental justice, Indigenous groups and grassroots organizers called “It Takes Roots,” and a California focused anti-extraction campaign targeting Gov. Brown aptly named “Brown’s Last Chance.” It drew over a thousand people that featured a mass march, rally and speakers from impacted communities.

But, when delegates began to arrive for the summit, the rally shifted into a series of highly disruptive rolling blockades at most of the entrances into the summit. The blockades delayed delegates for hours from getting into the summit. Inside GCAS, leaders from It Takes Roots successfully disrupted Bloomberg’s speech by storming the stage and chanting “The Air is Not for Sale!” until being escorted out by police. Bloomberg responded by calling community and Indigenous protestors no better than those wanting to build a wall on the US-Mexico border. The action successfully garnished major coverage in the New York Times, Washington Post, Reuters, and The Guardian. Furthermore, the action sent a loud and clear message to Brown, Bloomberg, GCAS and their delegates that communities and social movements have legitimate differences with their approach to climate solutions, the fossil fuel sector and carbon markets.

A matter of life and mass death and destruction

The clock is ticking and the science is not just a hoax, its actual science. The most recent United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UNIPCC) has said that we must drastically reduce emissions in the next twelve years to avoid climate catastrophe. The past four years (2014-2017) have been the hottest years on record. Last summer and fall were devastating as Hurricanes Harvey and Maria ravaged the Gulf Coast, the Caribbean and, in particular, Puerto Rico. In the same time, wildfires ravaged the western states with unprecedented destruction in Oregon and California. In 2018, the Mendocino Complex wildfire was the largest ever recorded in California history.

Additionally, the impacts of both fossil fuel extraction, processing and climate change harm those most affected by poverty, racism, colonialism and historic marginalization. In California, a [recent study](#) by the Center for Biological Diversity found that three-quarters of oil and gas permits approved by Jerry Brown’s administration are in low income and communities of color. During Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico, a long time U.S. colony, suffered catastrophic damage, over [5,000 died](#), saw its economy and employment [rates plummet](#) and has yet to have 100% of its vital infrastructure returned (i.e. not everyone has had their lights turned back on.).

Meanwhile, the implications of privatization policies of both Republicans and Democrats over the past 40 years stymied real relief efforts to storm and fire damaged regions.

With friends like these....

The failure to solve climate change and protect impacted communities remains an issue of political will.

The opposition to solving climate change is funded by Exxon & the Koch Brothers and is carried out by the Trump Administration. We know their role in this horror show, but the climate neo-liberals in the Democratic Party are equally culpable as things continue to worsen. In fact, attacks on communities, eco-systems and the climate were spinning out of control long before Donald Trump moved into the White House. The pro-market politics of “good liberal” politicians too frequently view corporations as allies in the fight against climate change. They publicly applaud companies for creating “carbon principles” and hiring Chief Environmental Officers. They enter into public partnerships with massive polluters. They create market based systems, like “cap and trade,” to seemingly regulate emissions, but instead subsidize industry.

Last summer, when Gov. Brown signed the bill extending California’s “cap and trade program” (AB398), he assured that the most high-profile piece of the state’s fight against climate change would persist for at least another decade. To guarantee the bill’s passage, a paragraph was added providing maximum compensation to companies for the “extra cost of doing business” in a state with the nation’s toughest emissions standards. The Bill made Brown and the State Assembly look eco-friendly, meanwhile guaranteeing what will likely result in benefits worth hundreds of millions of dollars for the Big Oil and Big Agriculture. Meanwhile, the primary purchaser of California carbon trading credits is the oil industry.

Over the past eight years, Brown has continued to support Big Oil and Gas operations in his state, with lenient regulation, permitting and supporting oil and gas extraction, infrastructure development and refining capacity. Communities in places like Kern County, CA are devastated by these practices. Other Democratic legislators and governors along the west coast have followed suit with similar policies, or at least attempts at them, despite People Power continuing to shut down fossil fuel export facilities in the Pacific Northwest, fighting Arctic drilling and challenging Wall Street financing of the oil and coal sectors.

With collective action, we are dangerous.

But amidst all the fanfare, the “good liberals” provided a moment that allowed social

movements fighting for a just and stable climate to contrast the rhetoric and the impact these policies and investments have on communities living near extraction and refining zones (i.e. the frontlines). It is clear that our political leaders aren't going to save us. Instead, it is organizing that will shift the dominant paradigms.

Every day, communities fight a “doomsday economy” of fossil fuel extraction, climate chaos and austerity economics brought to you by the Donald Trumps and Jerry Browns of the world. In British Columbia, Indigenous-led water protectors have fought the Trans Mountain pipeline turning the tables on the pipeline agenda of Canada's liberal leadership. In Appalachia, local landowner-led tree-sits and blockades have obstructed and disrupted the construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline across the Appalachian Trail for months. On a daily basis across the continent, bankers are confronted over their careless and ceaseless investment in fossil fuels and other environmental destruction.

In the bayous of Louisiana, the fight against Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) and its Bayou Bridge Pipeline has seriously escalated. After months of disruption of work along the pipeline route, the state of Louisiana, local police and the company's private security force has responded with harsh legal and physical reprisals against water protectors. This week, in Dallas, TX, the Stop ETP campaign, led by fierce local and Indigenous women resisting a number of pipelines around the country, literally [shut down the company's shareholder meeting](#) causing its CEO Kelcy Warren to flee the building.

Back in California, while there haven't been clear cut victories ending cap and trade or regulating fracking out of existence, the discourse around the “good liberal” Jerry Brown and his “real climate leadership” has been altered. People Power continues to mobilize in the streets, regulatory commissions and the ballot box. The “good liberal” narrative of market solutions to climate change has been tarnished. Fracking bans are spreading county by county in California, over 200 locally elected leaders signed letters calling on an end to oil and gas extraction in the state and local fights against new infrastructure are escalating. We may live in dark times, but anti-establishment movements that have broken with liberal elites continue to shine a light through it. Now is the time, for our communities and movements to continue escalating in the streets, the corporate offices and, if need be, to the front doors of the “good liberals.”