

S I X T E E N

Taking It to the Streets



IN THE WANING DAYS of 2008, the fight over coal seemed to briefly enter a strange zone of disconnection from reality—a surreal moment when debate over coal devolved into an argument over Christmas itself. At the Web site of the main pro-coal lobbying group, the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), visitors were treated to the bizarre sight of lumps of coal, dressed as carolers, singing traditional Christmas tunes with lyrics such as:

Frosty the coal man is a jolly happy soul...
There must be magic in clean coal technology
For when they looked for pollutants
There was nearly none to see!

Climate blogger Joe Romm marveled at the inanity of the carols: “In the twisted minds of the industry Mad Men who put this together, it makes perfect sense to turn songs about the birth of Jesus into songs about clean coal.... I’d say clean coal had jumped the shark, but I think you have to actually exist first before you can become self-parody.”

Joe Lucas of ACCCE responded, “I’ll put my years as a Sunday school teacher, church deacon, and church musician up

against just about anybody else when it comes to understanding hymnology and respect for religious traditions.”

What happened next amounted to a jolt of reality—delivered in the middle of a cold and moonless night to neighbors of the 55-year-old Kingston Fossil Plant near Harriman, Tennessee. Less than an hour after midnight on December 22, 2008, Chris Copeland, who lived outside Harriman with his wife and children on Watts Bar Lake, was awakened by a noise that he described as “crashing and popping.” Looking through his bedroom window, Copeland saw “waves of water going through the cove back here ... debris, trees flowing through the backyard.”

Not far from the Copelands’ house, a 60-foot-high impoundment containing fly ash from the plant had breached its containment dike and flowed out onto three hundred acres of residential land. The fly ash clumped in soot-gray icebergs that floated across roads and nestled against backyard swing sets. As residents became aware that the fly ash was laced with mercury, lead, cadmium, beryllium, and a host of other toxins, the Tennessee Valley Authority, which operated the plant and the impoundment, faced angry questions.

It was King Coal’s worst nightmare come true: toxic waste from coal flowing straight into the two-car garages of suburban Americans. At over a billion gallons, the spill was larger than any previous coal-related spill in American history. It was one hundred times the reported size of the Exxon Valdez disaster. Miraculously, there had been no loss of life.

For several days, the major media failed to grasp that something significant had happened. Matt Landon and other members of United Mountain Defense arrived on the scene and began organizing an action plan as well as contacting writers like Jeff

Biggers, who immediately began blogging about the disaster. On the Web, Twitter was abuzz with posts on the spill. Amy Gahran, a Colorado-based media consultant, threw herself into spearheading a national effort to make information on the spill available to other Twitterers. RoaneViews.com, a Web site for the community near the Kingston plant, participated in the Twitter campaign, as did the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* and the *Nashville Tennessean*. EPA staffer Jeffrey Levy provided agency maps and statistics on the plant. Then the mainstream media woke up, and photographs of the Tennessee sludge spill finally became a high-profile news item worldwide.

Barely a week after the accident, a Google search for the phrase “Tennessee spill” produced 2,280,000 results, making it one of the most prominently reported environmental catastrophes in decades. Press attention focused on the discrepancy between the industry’s claims about coal being clean and the ugly reality on display in Harriman, Tennessee. Clearly, the “I believe” clean coal ad campaign had backfired. After Tennessee, the ads continued to run, but for many people those ads merely served as reminders of coal’s actual impacts. Activists who had spent years struggling for some sort of coal waste regulation—none yet existed—saw that a window for legislation was suddenly wide open.

Meanwhile, the election of Barack Obama had raised hopes among environmentalists, and within weeks of taking the oath of office, Obama lifted expectations further as he signaled the intention of making a dramatic break from the Bush administration on the issue of climate change. Most of Obama’s appointees looked promising, especially Stephen Chu, a California Nobel laureate who had described coal as “my worst nightmare,” as secretary of energy. That impression was reinforced by a stream

of positive steps by regulatory agencies in the weeks that followed the arrival of the Obamistas. These included the EPA's challenge to the air permit for Big Stone II, the U.S. Air Force's cancellation of the Malmstrom Air Force Base coal-to-liquids project, and the EPA's initial steps toward regulating carbon dioxide and five other global warming gases under the Clean Air Act. More moves to regulate coal would be announced during the remainder of the spring, including a wide review of over two hundred mountaintop removal mining permits and initial steps toward regulating fly ash.

Anticipating the shift toward Washington, D.C., the Reality Coalition, which included the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the League of Conservation Voters, and Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection, blanketed the capital with an advertising campaign that ridiculed the idea of clean coal. The Reality Campaign countered the coal industry's simplistic clean coal message with an equally simple response: clean coal doesn't exist.

In one ad, created by the Crispin Porter & Bogusky agency, a man wearing a hard hat and holding a clipboard invites the viewer to take a tour of a clean coal facility. Opening a door, he steps onto a barren desert. "The machinery is kind of loud," he shouts above the wind, "but that is the sound of clean coal technology."

The ad ends with the words: "In reality, there is no such thing as clean coal in America today."

The introduction of the Reality Campaign, which began shortly before the Tennessee sludge disaster, could not have been better timed. The targeting was also good: heavy expenditures on billboards throughout Washington, D.C., ensured that federal policymakers charting strategy for the incoming Obama

administration would get the message. Anti-coal activists took heart: after years of deciding whether to fight the coal industry or make a deal with it, perhaps the environmental movement was beginning to make up its collective mind that fighting, rather than compromising, was the best strategy.

At the end of February, I flew to Washington, D.C., to participate in the first nationwide protest aimed at coal: a nonviolent blockade of a 99-year-old coal plant that operated just blocks from the Capitol itself. It promised to be a watershed event, for various reasons. One was that it marked a shift from protesting new coal plants to phasing out existing ones. Having succeeded in sidetracking most of the 151 new coal plants that had been proposed less than two years earlier, the next challenge was to phase out the existing fleet of coal plants. On the CoalSwarm wiki, which had grown to include 1,500 articles and had attracted over a million visits, reader statistics showed that the movement was pivoting rapidly toward assessing this new challenge. Whereas earlier the most popular pages on the wiki had been “Coal plants canceled in 2007,” now people visiting the site were most likely to read the page entitled “Existing U.S. coal plants.”

If phasing out existing coal plants was the goal, the Capitol Power Plant was a good place to start. Among a fleet that consisted of six hundred aging plants, half of which were built before 1965, the Capitol Power Plant represented the oldest of the old, having been commissioned by an act of Congress in 1904 and completed in 1910.

But old didn't necessarily mean feeble. Though the Capitol Power Plant hadn't produced a watt of electricity since 1952—just steam and refrigeration for the Capitol Complex—the old horse was still delivering the same chest-crunching, asthma-inducing kick, literally killing people in surrounding neighborhoods.

It was a good example of the fact that replacing dirty power plants with clean alternatives wasn't just a crucial step toward solving the climate crisis, it also had major public health benefits. A 2004 study by the Clean Air Task Force estimated that 515 people were dying annually in the D.C. metropolitan area because of power plant emissions, fifth among all U.S. cities. In 2002 the Capitol Power Plant was responsible for 65 percent of the PM_{2.5} particulate pollution produced by all point sources in the District of Columbia. The consequent toll of premature deaths was falling disproportionately on a low-income, largely African American population. Hill Residents for Steam Plant Conversion, a neighborhood group, had so far been unsuccessful in getting the plant shut down, but there had been some progress in Congress, where Nancy Pelosi had initiated a program to replace coal with natural gas for the portion of the Capitol Power Plant that serves the House of Representatives.

On the Senate side, things didn't look as promising. Since 2000 two Senate leaders, Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Robert Byrd (D-WV), with a combined tenure of seventy-three years, had blocked the Senate from eliminating coal at the plant. In May 2007 CNN reported that International Resources Inc. and the Kanawha Eagle mine had received contracts to supply a combined 40,000 tons of coal to the plant over the next two years. The two companies had given \$26,300 to the McConnell and Byrd campaigns during the 2006 election cycle.

Considering the death toll from air pollution, the destructive mining, the dirty money, and the climate impacts, the Capitol Power Plant was a pretty good microcosm of what was wrong with U.S. coal policy.

In setting a date for the blockade against the Capitol Power Plant, the organizers chose the weekend coinciding with

PowerShift, a huge youth climate conference that was expected to bring over twelve thousand young activists to D.C. Gearing up for the March 6 action, organizers from Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace, Chesapeake Climate Action, and other groups worked to spread the word about the blockade and to recruit, organize, and train activists in the principles and techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Matt Leonard, one of the organizers, wrote:

We aim to create an action framework that is accessible to all—from students, to elderly, to parents, to notable public figures and beyond. We envision a structured event that includes agreed-upon action guidelines, extensive training on non-violence, and a respectful tone that participants would be asked to abide by. We will have a legal team organized to support participants and will have prior discussion with authorities as to our non-violent intentions.

Leonard and the other organizers knew that the decision to conduct civil disobedience, however nonviolent the intent, meant walking a tightrope. While any such action cannot be carried out without a certain degree of intensity, at the same time the message needed to be broad enough to attract a spectrum of groups. The tone needed to be militant but tightly disciplined, since even a single act of violence could undermine the entire project.

Within the climate movement, the wisdom of such militancy was far from universally accepted. As the organizers of the Capitol Power Plant action approached individual groups for endorsements, leaders were forced to take sides on the question of whether they would publicly support an action that would openly involve civil disobedience.

Some felt that even a slight possibility of violent disruption made the action ill advised. To others, the timing was wrong. They believe that mounting a civil disobedience action in

Washington within the first one hundred days after the inauguration would alienate the new administration by appearing to be a punishment aimed at Obama before he had even had time to flesh out his policies toward coal. Supporters of the action countered that unless the movement moved quickly to assert its strength, the Obama administration would fall prey to the same utility and coal interests that had long controlled the back rooms of regulation, legislation, and policy.

There was a hint of generational tension in the response to the action. Those declining to participate (including all of the major environmental groups) as well as those claiming that the action was too early, too risky, or too militant tended to be middle-aged “establishment” environmentalists. Most of the organizers (with the notable exception of Ted Glick, a veteran of the Vietnam-era peace movement) were younger than thirty. To them, the action was infused with a sense that the time had come to make a clear break from the ineffectual “insider” tactics of the past. Instead, an “inside/outside” approach was needed to allow more forceful pressure to be applied to the political process. The organizers wrote:

We can determine the fate of our generation. We know there is a climate crisis and we know we have to stop it. We've organized, we've lobbied, we've passed policies, we've educated, we've agitated, and still our government has not recognized the scope and urgency of global warming. We know we have the capacity to transform our society. What we lack is the political will.

But now there is a new administration and a new Congress, which gives us another chance. We have a window, but we must open it. Together.

Like the movements that have come before us, we have an opportunity to send a powerful message of urgency through peaceful civil disobedience. There has never been an American tradition more noble, and it is needed now more than ever.

But while organizing the action was mainly in the hands of young activists, a number of senior figures in the environmental movement lent their support. Two writers, Bill McKibben and Wendell Berry, penned the following call to action:

Dear Friends,

There are moments in a nation's—and a planet's—history when it may be necessary for some to break the law in order to bear witness to an evil, bring it to wider attention, and push for its correction. We think such a time has arrived, and we are writing to say that we hope some of you will join us in Washington D.C. on Monday March 2 in order to take part in a civil act of civil disobedience outside a coal-fired power plant near Capitol Hill... The industry claim that there is something called "clean coal" is, put simply, a lie. But it's a lie told with tens of millions of dollars, which we do not have. We have our bodies, and we are willing to use them to make our point... It's time to make clear that we can't safely run this planet on coal at all... This will be, to the extent it depends on us, an entirely peaceful demonstration, carried out in a spirit of hope and not rancor. We will be there in our dress clothes, and ask the same of you.

As the date of the blockade approached, over a hundred groups lent their names in support, including peace groups, poverty groups, and environmental groups. So did a number of prominent individuals, including NASA's James Hansen; actors Mike Farrell, Daryl Hannah, Martin Sheen, and Susan Sarandon; musicians Will.I.Am, Goapele, John Densmore, and Kathy Mattea; writers Naomi Klein, David Korten, Noam Chomsky, and Paul Hawken; and environmentalists Paul Ehrlich and Gus Speth.

On the day before the action, a sudden blizzard hit the Chesapeake Bay region, dumping half a foot of wet snow on Washington and snarling traffic on highways and city streets. Organizers rushed to complete the last of hundreds of nonviolence trainings. Despite concerns that turnout would be decimated, a large and spirited crowd at an emergency planning meeting unanimously decided to press on with the action.

The next morning, an estimated four thousand protesters gathered at Liberty Park, then marched toward the Capitol Power Plant surrounded by red, green, blue, and yellow flags and banners and led by a contingent of Native American and Appalachian leaders. Reaching the plant, the demonstrators divided into four groups, each blocking one of the entrances. At each entrance, helmeted police guarded the gates, in effect enforcing the objective of the march to shut down the plant. Listening to speeches, chanting, and singing songs, protesters shivered in the 23-degree cold.

It was clear that the police were in “stand back” mode—accepting the blockade and intent on avoiding arrests. In effect, the demonstrators had won, though many were disappointed that the opportunity had been lost to dramatize the issue of coal worldwide through hundreds of arrests at the heart of the nation’s capital city.

In fact, congressional leaders had already preempted the protest. During the week leading up to the blockade, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had directed the Capitol architect, Stephen Ayers, to switch the Capitol Power Plant to natural gas. Two months later Ayers reported that the switch had been accomplished, though coal would be reserved for times of unusually cold weather or equipment outages.

Of course, the demonstration had never been just about the Capitol Power Plant, which was actually a fairly small facility compared to the typical coal-fired power plant. Among the other goals that the organizers had hoped to accomplish were to move coal policy into the center of the national conversation on climate, to push for stronger legislative action on climate, and to legitimize direct action as a movement tool.

Based on events over the subsequent months, the final goal showed the clearest results. Following the Capitol Climate Action, the number of direct action protests against coal immediately increased both in frequency and size. At the Cliffside Plant in North Carolina, hundreds protested and forty-eight were arrested. Another fourteen were arrested blockading TVA headquarters in Knoxville. In West Virginia, five activists were arrested unfurling a 40-foot-tall banner that read “EPA stop MTR” at Massey Energy’s Edwight mine. In Nottingham, England, in a preemptive strike aimed at preventing a large direct action protest at the Ratcliff-on-Soar coal plant, police arrested 114 people at a community center and school. Around the world, more than two hundred people began fasting for up to forty days to draw attention to the urgency of global warming.

To provide a greater sense of coherence and planning to this ongoing swirl of protest, three dozen organizations had met in November to initiate the Power Past Coal campaign. The goal of the campaign, which kicked off on January 21, 2009, was to sponsor an action against coal on each of the first one hundred days of the Obama administration. By the halfway point of the campaign, the hundred-action goal had already been surpassed.

A glance through the list of actions that took place around the country reads like a catalog of the movement itself: “Dirty Movie Nights” in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; “Cliffside Boycott Party” in Asheville, North Carolina; “Valentine’s Day Action for Black Mesa” in Flagstaff, Arizona; “NY Coal Trade Association Protest” in New York City.

In Boston, Massachusetts, a mannequin was found chained to the doors of the Kenmore Square Bank of America. Purportedly representing the group Mannequins for Climate Justice, the mannequin carried a notice reading “Even a dummy

like me can see that Bank of America's massive loans to coal companies and support for the epidemic of foreclosures and evictions have to stop now."

Midway through the Power Past Coal campaign, at a crowded meeting in Washington, D.C., across the street from the PowerShift conference, organizers from around the country met in a brainstorming session to plan how to wrap up the campaign. As usual, the challenge faced by Dana Kuhnline of the Alliance for Appalachia, who along with intern Sierra Murdoch had spearheaded the campaign, was to raise the national visibility of a movement that was largely rural and widely dispersed. An answer was suggested by Marie Gladue Dine of the Black Mesa Water Coalition, who noted the tradition in some Native American religions of making offerings to the six directions: North, South, East, West, Sky, and Earth. The idea bore fruit on April 26, when six activists, each representing a strand of the anti-coal movement, returned to Washington to publicize the results of the Power Past Coal campaign, to lobby Congress, and to speak on behalf of thousands of individuals who had taken part in over three hundred actions in all fifty states. The spokespeople included L.J. Turner, a Wyoming rancher and member of the Western Organization of Resource Councils; Marie Gladue Dine of the Black Mesa Water Coalition in Arizona; Mike Cherin, an organizer with the Canary Coalition clean air advocacy group in North Carolina; Samuel Villaseñor, an organizer with the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization in Chicago; Towana Yepa, a member of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians in Michigan; and Lorelei Scarbro, an organizer with Coal River Mountain Watch in West Virginia.

All six activists came from areas that had already been severely impacted by mines and power plants. All shared the

common goal of putting a halt to destructive mining, initiating an orderly phase-out of the six hundred existing coal plants, and creating a new energy infrastructure based on efficiency and clean energy generation.

As I considered the nature of the challenge ahead, I noticed that British billionaire Sir Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Airlines, had established a \$25 million prize known as the Virgin Earth Challenge to the first inventor who figured out a way to remove 10 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. To me, Branson was missing the point entirely. The problem was not a lack of affordable technology. Wind and solar power were already available for commercial deployment, and the “intermittency problem” was already being addressed through new storage technologies and better integration of the grid.

Meanwhile, Europe, Japan, California, and other locations had already shown that energy efficiency standards and investments could reduce power consumption by half or more. In short, the problem wasn't technical; rather, it was political. As long as the coal industry remained politically dominant, there would be little point in inventing yet more alternative technologies if King Coal could simply find ways to block their implementation. More than new lab work, the real challenge of climate change lay in broadening the reach of grassroots organizing and political mobilization. Ultimately, humanity's fate would be decided not in the laboratories but in the streets, on campuses, on the steps of legislatures and courthouses, at the gates of factories and mines, in the doorways of banks and stock exchanges—anywhere people gathered and acted in concert to make change.

Two years earlier, the 151 proposed coal plants listed on Erik Shuster's spreadsheet had looked like nothing short of a

planetary doomsday list. Any one of those coal plants, if built, would have emitted millions of tons of carbon dioxide each year. But in July 2009, the Sierra Club reported that 100 coal plants had been cancelled, and shortly after that the club added yet another cancellation to the list. Collectively, those 101 plants amounted to over 60,000 megawatts of generating capacity that could now be replaced with climate-friendly technologies. Assuming an average lifespan of fifty years, those 101 plants would have emitted 20 billion tons of carbon dioxide, twice the 10-billion-metric-ton goal of the Virgin Earth Challenge.

No doubt, when Branson devised the prize he was thinking about how to motivate the proverbial garage inventor or moonlighting chemist to come up with a new planet-rescuing technology in the narrow sense of the term—perhaps some sort of chemical reagent, gene-tweaked algae, or superabsorbent biochar that could suck carbon dioxide molecules out of the atmosphere. But if civilization is going to survive, it is time for visionaries like Branson to do some out-of-the-box thinking about technology itself, starting with the meaning of the term.

Wikipedia's definition of technology is as good as any:

A strict definition is elusive; "technology" can refer to material objects of use to humanity, such as machines, hardware or utensils, but can also encompass broader themes, including systems, methods of organization, and techniques.

The "technologies" of grassroots politics used by the anti-coal movement—community organizing, non-violent direct action, corporate campaigning, Web 2.0 networking, regulatory intervention and litigation, etc.—are neither complex nor mysterious, but with them the movement has accomplished the astonishing feat of putting the brakes on a runaway train that promised to kill any hope of halting catastrophic climate

change. If the movement had not challenged the wave of new plants, the vast majority would have been built, and the result would have been to lock the U.S. energy system into ever-rising emissions of greenhouse gases and undermine climate-safe investments.

The dynamics of plant cancellations are complex, typically amounting to a combination of factors that may include rising construction costs, legal challenges, public and political opposition, and regulatory delays. Grassroots action employs a wide variety of techniques—from sit-ins to press releases to legal briefs—to bring all the stars into alignment. There’s a bit of alchemy involved, a bit of “fake it till you make it,” and lots of sheer scrambling. Each situation is unique.

Obviously, Richard Branson is not about to write a check to the No New Coal Plants movement for \$25 million. For starters, there is no organization called “No New Coal Plants Movement.” The CoalSwarm Web site shows at least 250 separate organizations working to oppose coal plants and mines. But when one considers what that movement has accomplished on a shoestring, it is interesting to imagine what could be accomplished if Branson were to distribute the Virgin Earth Challenge prize among those groups.

Despite its accomplishments, the anti-coal movement continues to operate largely out of the public spotlight. But at least some observers seem to recognize its significance. Writing in the *Manchester Guardian*, British journalist Juliette Jowit reported:

In a few years, the backlash against coal power in America has become the country’s biggest-ever environmental campaign, transforming the nation’s awareness of climate change and inspiring political leaders to take firmer action after years of doubt and delay. Plants have been defeated in at least 30 of the 50 states, uniting those with already

strong environmental records, such as California, with more conservative areas, such as the southern and central states.

Even Jowitt's description understates the movement's accomplishments. To me, the No New Coal Plants movement represents evidence that civilization as a whole—the planetary brain—might possess a quality that psychologists sometimes refer to as “executive function,” the ability to prioritize one's actions and energies, focusing on the most important. At this point in history, climate change is generally recognized as the most important challenge facing humanity, an existential crisis for civilization itself. The scientists who have studied the problem for decades have concluded that ending emissions from coal is the key to heading off dangerous climate change. The fact that enough people have grasped the danger, focused on the solution, and joined effectively to accomplish political change—all this shows a civilization capable of thinking on its feet. The odds remain daunting, but this is reason for hope.

