ABOLISHING FOSSIL FUELS

Lessons from Movements That Won

SPECTRE

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“The climate crisis will continue for as long as combustion capitalism reigns. Kevin Young’s magisterial *Abolishing Fossil Fuels* explains how we’ll end that reign. With lucid and thorough historical analysis, Young shows how to win against the oil companies and their politicians. It’s a tour de force, and a gift to anyone lacking faith in the possibility of radical change.”
—Raj Patel, author of *Stuffed and Starved*

“Kevin Young’s *Abolishing Fossil Fuels* is the kind of book the US climate movement desperately needs. The historic victories against slavery, the auto industry, and Jim Crow offer us the chance to build on more than the moral successes of past movements for justice, but also the wealth of tactical lessons that helped working people wrench concessions out of the clutches of yesterday’s elites. Today’s activists and organizations must ask not only principled questions about what they stand for, but also practical questions about how to deal with those who stand against progress. *Abolishing Fossil Fuels* provides a tremendous place to start and should be highly encouraged reading especially for young climate activists.”
—Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, author of *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*

“It’s all in the vowels. Capital with an *a* means money while capitol with an *o* means law. Capital summarizes economic accumulation; capitol is the location of legislation. Fossil fuel capitalists lead us to impending deaths for the planet and the people, and a ‘genocidal consensus’ in the acceptance of those extinctions. History shows that local strikes, boycotts, demos, and riots against capital succeed while national electioneering and lobbying against capitols do not. This is a powerful argument, densely researched, and entirely convincing to avoid the clear and present danger.”
—Peter Linebaugh, coauthor of *The Many-Headed Hydra*

“Of the many present crises facing the future of humanity, climate change and its threat of mass extinction appears to be the most daunting. Kevin Young argues compellingly, however, that electoral strategies to fight climate change are a dead end. Rather, his study of past successful movements suggests that radical upsurges, the building of disruptive mass movements, including demonstrations, civil disobedience, and large strikes, are more compelling alternatives for stemming the tide, while ultimately only the end of capitalism will save us. A tour de force!”
—Michael Goldfield, author of *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*

“In *Abolishing Fossil Fuels: Lessons from Movements That Won*, Kevin Young makes a compelling and well-researched case for the kinds of disruptive grassroots tactics that are required to address the climate crisis. He dives into the history of several key movements that have succeeded and disabuses the reader of some well-accepted myths about them. Young focuses on the strategies needed to take power from the fossil fuel industry, and lead to a livable world. This is required reading for anyone interested in thinking strategically about how to address the climate crisis. Which should be all of us.”
—Cynthia Kaufman, author of *The Sea Is Rising and So Are We: A Climate Justice Handbook*

"Want to get rid of the fossil fuels that are destroying our future but are baffled about how to do so? Is climate protection an impossible dream? Are the fossil fuel forces just too powerful to take down? If you want honest, realistic, but also hopeful answers to those questions, read Kevin Young's *Abolishing Fossil Fuels*. Young presents a careful analysis of the powers that are purveying fossil fuels—and of how ordinary people can defeat them by inflicting sustained disruption on the elites that are perpetuating climate destruction. If the original Abolitionists could take down the slaveholders—the greatest power in the land—why can't we abolish fossil fuels? Kevin Young's answer is we can. I hope this book will become the strategic handbook for the climate protection movement."

—Jeremy Brecher, author of *Against Doom: A Climate Insurgency Manual*

"As authoritarian states increasingly criminalize 'fossil fuel refugees,' Kevin Young provides an abolitionist analysis of the climate crisis. Young not only demonstrates the 'structural power' of antiracist, climate justice, and labor movements to confront the fossil fuel industry, but also explores strategies to advance its abolition. An urgent read."

—Jordan T. Camp, author *Incarcerating the Crisis*

"Kevin Young's fast-moving and wise study combines a terrific idea for a book and fine execution of that idea. *Abolishing Fossil Fuels* calls for just that, and in doing so reminds us that the great abolitions—for example, of male monopoly on political rights, of management autocracy in the workplace, and above all of chattel slavery—have stressed dreaming and acting equally. In inspired moments based on long patterns of direct action, they have won. Young draws the lessons of those victories for climate justice and planetary survival, emphasizing how much success grew from a protest tradition and how little from any simple identification of change with electoral politics."

—David Roediger, author of *The Sinking Middle Class: A Political History of Debt, Misery, and the Drift to the Right*

"In *Abolishing Fossil Fuels*, Kevin Young delineates how social movements have unpicked and can defeat the fossil fuel industry's stranglehold not by focusing on politicians but by directly confronting the polluting companies and the financial institutions that support them. He nimbly weaves this analysis together with the history of other social movements, such as the work to abolish slavery, the labor struggles of workers in the automobile industry, the fight against white supremacists, and how coal miners fought against air polluters both using and pinpointing the limits of federal clean air laws. Young concludes by discussing how to build an intersectional climate movement, one that fights back against racism and engages the working class. A must read for anyone interested in ending our reliance on fossil fuels."

—Christina Gerhardt, author of *Sea Change: An Atlas of Islands in a Rising Ocean*

Editor: Sasha Lilley

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Small portions of text appeared previously in the following articles: “History Shows That Sustained, Disruptive Protests Work,” *YES!* July 8, 2020; “A Tipping Point for the Defeat of Fossil Fuels?” *TomDispatch*, December 10, 2020 (with Richard Lachmann and Michael Schwartz); “Georgia’s Voter Suppression Is Sparking Boycotts. History Shows They Can Work,” *Truthout*, April 9, 2021; “Trump, Biden, and Why Elections Don’t Bring Bigger Policy Changes,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 39 (2023): 7–29; “Fossil Fuels, Capitalists, and Prospects for the Climate Movement,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 39 (2023): 127–57.

Abolishing Fossil Fuels: Lessons from Movements That Won
© Kevin A. Young
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ISBN: 979–8–88744–033–0 (paperback)
ISBN: 979–8–88744–043–9 (ebook)
Library of Congress Control Number: 2023944309
Cover by John Yates / www.stealworks.com
Interior design by briandesign

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PM Press
PO Box 23912
Oakland, CA 94623
www.pmpress.org

Printed in the USA.

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Introduction

STRATEGIZING BEGINS WITH AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ENEMY, NAMELY HOW IT EXERCISES power and where it's vulnerable. This book analyzes the fossil fuel industry's sources of power and how movements sometimes defeat it. My goal is to draw some lessons that help illuminate a path toward the abolition of fossil fuels. I derive those lessons from the recent history of the climate struggle and from the histories of other social movements that have defeated capitalists.

I argue that the conventional approach of trying to elect and pressure politicians won't cut it. The movement must directly confront the polluters, the financial institutions that enable them, and all the employers that make decisions about investment, employment, production, and consumption in our economy. Climate and Indigenous organizations have been most effective when they have gone after capitalists, both directly via economic pressure and indirectly by targeting the government regulators and judges who make life-and-death rulings about pipelines, power plants, and drilling sites. My evidence for this assertion comes mostly from capitalists themselves, whose voices appear in business publications like the *Financial Times*.

The climate movement can learn from other movements that overcame long odds. In the second part of the book, I examine some classic victories over capitalists, from the abolition of US slavery in the 1860s to twentieth-century struggles for workers' rights, racial equality, and clean air. I argue that the fundamental source of those movements' power was the direct threat they posed to capitalists through strikes, boycotts, and other mass disruption. Electoral and legislative tactics were of secondary importance. Here too, my argument is based mostly on what elites themselves said about the movements, supplemented by the words of activists. The climate emergency is an existential crisis unlike any humanity has ever faced. But understanding how those other capitalists were defeated can help inform which elites we target and how.

A Case for Climate Hope

Hope is important for building a movement. Hope by itself doesn't lead people to become activists—anger and love are probably more important drivers. Yet angry or compassionate people generally won't engage in sustained political action unless they feel that the status quo is changeable and that their actions can help change it.[1]

Feeling hopeless in the face of the mounting catastrophe is understandable. Each year brings more intense droughts, superstorms, wildfires, and heatwaves. By the 2070s, regions home to three billion people may be incompatible with human life. By one estimate hunger, disease, and heat stress resulting from carbon emissions already kill over 400,000 people annually, a number set to increase dramatically in the coming decades. Particulate matter from the burning of fossil fuels kills an additional ten million people each year. About 28 percent of all living species are at risk of extinction, threatening the ecosystems on which all life depends.[2] On our current trajectory, the world is on track for heating of 2.5 to 2.9 degrees Celsius over preindustrial levels by 2100. This puts us "on course to cross multiple dangerous tipping points," which will endanger the prospects for maintaining "liveable conditions" and "stable societies" on Earth.[3] The strongest word in our common parlance, *genocide*, hardly captures the violence of a full-bore assault on the conditions that support life on our planet.

The perpetrators respond to scientists' warnings by expanding their drilling operations and blocking government reforms. Entire political parties, led by the Republicans in the United States, are unapologetic champions of obliteration. Rather than attacking the real problem, most governing elites respond to the escalating climate chaos by building more border walls and detention centers to keep out fossil fuel refugees. The same politicians who support record military budgets and tax cuts for billionaires tell us there's no money for a Green New Deal or other programs that would help working people. No wonder most of the world's young adults believe "humanity is doomed" and say they feel "helpless" when asked about the climate.[4]

Yet as bleak as the current scenario appears, total despair is unwarranted. The most urgent manifestation of the emergency, the atmospheric concentration of carbon, can still be greatly mitigated. The general policy outlines of the transition to a zero-carbon economy (i.e., "decarbonization") are clear. Governments and businesses need to make massive investments in renewable energy and energy conservation, at a rate about three to six times higher than current investment levels.[5] They must simultaneously reduce fossil fuel supply by ending all new extraction projects and phasing out existing ones, ideally through a system of national caps on carbon. And they must make huge investments in adaptation measures and loss-and-damage compensation to help the most vulnerable populations deal with the heating that is locked in. Government has an indispensable role to play, both through its own investments and through fiscal, monetary, and regulatory measures to shift private-sector investments. These policies would have numerous other benefits like job creation and better health, particularly for the working class and people of color who are most harmed by the status quo. Those who have contributed most to the crisis and who have the most capacity to fix the problem must shoulder most of the costs—starting with the United States and its capitalists, who are guilty of 25 percent of global emissions since 1751 and who control unrivaled resources with which to fund the transition.[6]

We're fortunate to have both the money and the technology needed for this transition. The fiscal cost would be much smaller than the economic costs of climate chaos, much smaller than the state-led economic overhaul of the World War II years, and much smaller than the trillions in subsidies that rich countries have dispensed during the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] This path is also eminently feasible from a technological standpoint. As the International Energy Agency notes, "All the technologies needed to achieve the necessary deep cuts in global emissions by 2030 already exist, and the policies that can drive their deployment are already proven."[8] The only major obstacle is political: the capitalist perpetrators of planetary destruction are blocking the necessary policy changes.

Some on the Left have unwittingly fueled climate despair by arguing that decarbonization is impossible without overthrowing capitalism. The sentiment that underlies that argument is justified: the capitalist system is indeed fundamentally depraved. The well-being of humans and other living things requires that we replace markets, private enterprise, and profits with a socialist system governed by workers and communities.[9] But we cannot expect to end capitalism before the 2030 or 2050 deadlines that science gives us. Building socialism will require radical mass movements at a level far beyond what we currently have. Consequently, most people are bound to feel helpless unless we offer a plan for short-term climate stabilization. Fortunately for us, it is possible to limit heating to 1.5°C within the framework of a regulated capitalism, as advocates of a global Green New Deal propose. That won't end all ecological destruction, but it will address the most urgent aspect of the crisis, carbon emissions. It will buy us time to build the socialist future we want.[10]

Similarly, the "degrowth" platform espoused by some leftists misunderstands what needs to be done. Stabilizing the climate requires the growth of some sectors, such as renewable energy and mass transit and care work, alongside the contraction or death of other sectors, starting with fossil fuels. We need to "grow the good and shrink the bad," as one political economist says.[11] When degrowth advocates instead decry all economic growth as harmful, they are implicitly calling for austerity and mass unemployment. Fortunately, austerity and impoverishment are not ecologically necessary.[12] We can decarbonize while still improving life for most people and advancing racial, gender, and national equity. Wealth redistribution is indispensable to those goals, but redistribution alone will not be enough to ensure decent and dignified lives for all: selective growth will also be necessary. Sloppy condemnations of all economic growth forfeit an opportunity to build a working-class environmental movement and feed the nihilistic despair that inhibits climate mobilization.

Climate despair is compounded by the assumption, also apparent among some leftists, that we're totally doomed if we fail to slash emissions on the timeline scientists say is necessary.[13] Yes, we need to make deep cuts to fossil fuel use during this decade to avert the worst impacts of global heating, and by 2050 we need to eliminate almost all carbon pollution. It's also true that we're approaching, if we haven't already crossed, certain irreversible tipping points in the biosphere. The Left's sense of urgency is entirely appropriate to the situation. However, warnings about catastrophe can be paralyzing if they imply that survival is an all-or-nothing game. Things can always get much, much worse. As climate scientists often remind us, "Every bit of warming, whether it's above or below 1.5°C, increases the risks that we face. So anything we can do to limit the amount of warming will reduce the hazards we're creating." To put it another way, "every tenth of a degree will make a huge difference in lives lost."[14] Conversely, any bit of heating that we prevent reduces death and misery and gives us breathing room to build the resilient, equitable society that we'll need for surviving and thriving on a hotter planet. We need to treat this as a protracted war in which every inch of the battlefield means life or death. If we miss scientists' 2030 deadline to slash global emissions by 43 percent, the war won't end there.

Despair also underestimates the vulnerability of the fossil fuel companies. Even as they announce plans for drilling far into the future, industry executives and investors are worried that their time is almost up. Their fears stem partly from market forces. With technological advances the price of renewable energy has steadily declined, making fossil fuels less attractive to utilities, businesses, and consumers. The other source of their fears is the movement. In recent years industry leaders have bemoaned a "rising tide of protests, litigation, and vandalism" against fossil fuel projects, warning that "the level of intensity has ramped up," with "more opponents" who are "better organized." Sporadic resistance has given way to "constant opposition from environmental groups and affected parties," a common complaint in the industry press.[15] These concerns are well-founded, as dozens of defeated coal, oil, and gas projects demonstrate. In the early 2020s the industry's fortunes were boosted by high global inflation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which companies exploited to jack up prices and demand more fossil fuel extraction. But the boost may prove temporary, since in many countries those events also reinforced demands for a shift to renewable energy. Even amid those developments the climate movement continued to win important victories against fossil fuel projects. Given the recent history, despair is both self-defeating and empirically unjustified. It only benefits the perpetrators.

We can turn the tide against fossil fuels. The movement, in conjunction with economic and geopolitical forces, has already started to do so, just far too gradually. Remembering that there's still hope is important for building the movement we need.

The Electoral Illusion

If hope is an important ingredient for the climate movement, maintaining hope depends on finding an effective strategy. The movement's participants and potential recruits must be able to see the movement's actions "as part of a trajectory which, with sufficient growth, could actually put an end to fossil fuel emissions."[16] A realistic strategy must begin by assessing the balance of forces among capitalists and state elites, the means by which elites exercise power, and the pressure points where they are vulnerable. How might we force industrial polluters to end the use of fossil fuels? How might the Green New Deal and related government reforms become politically possible? And how can we as a climate movement best contribute to those goals? Though numerous books detail the problems and the policy solutions, few discuss how we can force elites to accept those solutions.

The default strategy consists of electoral campaigning, lobbying, and maybe an occasional protest designed to grab media attention. Many in the climate movement focus on trying to "elect friendly politicians" by supporting progressives in the Democratic primaries and turning out voters for general elections.[17] This approach is understandable. The modern Republican Party is dominated by genocidal maniacs who seek to burn every last ounce of fossil fuels and to enforce a violent and hierarchical social order as the planet heats. They use overtly autocratic means to do it, from mass voter suppression to fascistic violence. In this context voting clearly matters. It's tempting to dedicate ourselves to electoral campaigns out of desperation.

Nonetheless, an electioncentric approach is based on flawed premises. Though it can flip or preserve a swing seat here or there, it demands enormous resources for a payoff that is small and uncertain. Election campaigns cannot generate the major changes in public consciousness that we would need to end Republicans' control over government. Recent experience is not encouraging. Even four years of a cartoonish sociopath as president brought little progress in shifting voter opinion: twelve million more voters supported Trump in 2020 than in 2016. Part of the blame lies with the fecklessness of the liberal "resistance," including a Democratic leadership and liberal media that chose not to spotlight Trump's worst crimes and instead focused on matters of marginal interest to most working people, such as Trump's connections to Putin. The one approach that might deliver better electoral results—an unabashed Bernie Sanders-style progressivism—is anathema to the party leadership.[18] Despite the Bernie Sanders campaigns of 2016 and 2020 and all the energy the Left has poured into trying to transform the party, the probusiness leaders remain ensconced and are likely to persist with their failed electoral strategies. Meanwhile, the progressive strategy of running candidates in Democratic primary races has yielded unimpressive results, notwithstanding a few scattered victories. In 2020 "only 3 incumbent House Democrats out of 223 incumbent Democrats lost their primaries to progressives or anyone else," and the result in 2022 was just as dismal.[19] The resource advantages of establishment Democrats, and the hegemonic (if mistaken) view among Democratic voters that a progressive cannot beat a Republican, makes it difficult for left-leaning candidates to win in large numbers.

Electioncentric approaches also tend to assume that politicians respond to majority sentiment: *if we can rally the majority around our cause, we'll succeed*. The problem is that the US government usually disobeys the will of the majority. Statistical analyses that compare public preferences and policy find that while "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy," the opinions of "average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence."[20] Having majority support is no guarantee of victory, to say the least. The divergence between mass opinion and policy reflects the fact that politicians are not the key decision-makers. They are primarily conduits for those who hold the real power.

Even if Republicans' voter suppression were removed from the picture, the US electoral system could hardly be considered free and fair. Capitalists possess unparalleled resources with which to shape elections. Successful candidates must typically go to great lengths to attract business support, even more so since the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision abolished limits on corporate campaign spending.[21] The winning candidate repays campaign donations by appointing business-friendly advisers, regulators, and judges and by keeping an open door for corporate lobbyists.

Structural features of the US political system further enhance the power of entrenched elites. The Electoral College, established as a safeguard against the abolition of slavery, is obviously antidemocratic. The Senate's antimajoritarian structure also concentrates power in senators from rural and white-dominated regions, serving as a chokepoint for capitalists to block progressive reforms. In addition to protecting slavery, the Senate was intended more generally "to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority," whom James Madison feared would vote "for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project."[22] These structures facilitate the protection of established power in numerous other ways. For example, they enable the appointment of far-right federal judges who give their blessing to Republican legislation, voter suppression, gerrymandering, and even outright coup attempts.

If these safeguards fail and politicians waver in their commitment to business profits, business possesses a further weapon. Private employers and financial institutions control the major investment decisions in the economy and thus most of the resources on which society depends: access to employment, loans for consumers and businesses, and the availability and prices of goods, services, and housing. They routinely threaten to withhold investments when policymakers don't give them everything they demand. Sometimes they follow through on that disinvestment in the form of a "capital strike."[23] In so doing they convince policymakers that political survival depends on the maintenance of probusiness policies. Much of the public also comes to believe that challenging business prerogatives will mean higher unemployment, higher prices, and lower tax revenue. State institutions like the Pentagon, Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and local and state law enforcement agencies exercise a parallel form of power over their policy domains. They often threaten to obstruct policy reforms they find disagreeable and sometimes even engage in work stoppages.[24]

As a result of all these factors, the Left is at a tremendous disadvantage when it enters the electoral terrain. Even if progressive candidates can get elected, their ability to enact real change is severely constrained by the structural power of capital, resistance from state institutions, the hostility of Democratic leaders, and the numerous congressional and judicial chokepoints that entrenched elites can use to thwart change. "Electoral victory based on even a modest program of reform does not confer the power to put the reforms into practice," as the Marxist André Gorz noted in 1967.[25] Because politicians are not the primary decision-makers in capitalist societies, elections are at best a weak and indirect means for getting what we need.

This is especially true for the climate movement. The fossil fuel industry has wielded its weapons with devastating efficacy in recent decades. It has almost infinite cash to spend on elections and lobbying. When anti-fossil-fuel candidates manage to win elections, the industry still has multiple ways of coercing them into maintaining pro-fossil-fuel policies. Even a strong electoral mandate for sharp cuts to emissions does not guarantee the defeat of polluters, as the Obama and Biden presidencies illustrate.[26] The industry's success in crushing Joe Biden's Build Back Better legislation, which proposed substantial reforms to energy and social policy, is of major historical significance. Some of the climate spending provisions did squeak through in smaller form in 2022, yet the deep compromises in the final deal demonstrated the industry's awesome power of obstruction. The removal of most of the social provisions, which were highly popular with voters, also increased the likelihood that Democrats would lose control of Congress and/or the White House in upcoming elections, making additional climate legislation very unlikely.

The systemic obstacles to reform effectively require the movement to build an electoral supermajority—far *more* than 50 percent—that can neutralize the power of fossil fuel capital in the three branches of government. At first glance opinion polls give cause for optimism. A strong majority of voters has long supported regulations on polluters and more public investment in renewables. In 2021, 70 percent of the public said government "should regulate the release of greenhouse gases from sources like power plants, cars and factories." Fifty-five percent supported a federal mandate requiring utilities to increase their use of renewables, which was the centerpiece of Biden's climate legislation until Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia forced its removal. Only 16 percent opposed a mandate. Even Republican voters were somewhat supportive: more supported than opposed the idea (35 percent versus 30 percent). Forty-six percent of Republicans agreed with Biden's pledge to cut US carbon emissions 50 percent by 2030.[27] Manchin and all Republican legislators were far to the right of their constituents.

However, building an electoral supermajority also requires that voters prioritize the movement's concerns at election time. Unfortunately, the climate crisis remains a secondary concern for most voters.[28] Only a minority prioritizes climate when voting or even understands how candidates' climate platforms compare with the scientific consensus. Many voters who do care about the environment can be convinced that the problem is not very serious. Republican voters' understanding of climate got even worse once Trump became president. After Trump left office in 2021 only 29 percent were aware that "the effects of global warming have already begun," versus 46 percent who had said so in 1997. Just 32 percent thought it was caused by human activity, down from 52 percent in 2003. The rest of the population was more aware of basic reality, but still just 45 percent classified the crisis as "an urgent problem that requires immediate government action," versus 49 percent who viewed it as "a longer-term problem that requires more study."[29]

Many factors explain these findings. Polluter propaganda is beamed into tens of millions of minds each day by far-right outlets. Liberal media, meanwhile, hardly cover the crisis in proportion to its magnitude and give scant attention to the Green New Deal–style reforms that would improve most people's lives. Many school curricula ignore the climate crisis almost entirely.[30] Furthermore, mobilizing a majority of US voters around climate is difficult given that the worst impacts of today's policies will be felt by future generations and primarily outside the United States. Even when voters are somewhat informed, the fossil fuel industry's threats of higher fuel prices and disinvestment often scare them into suppressing their proclimate inclinations.

The prospects for building an electoral coalition around climate are bleak, particularly at the national level.[31] It is thus unwise for the climate movement to make electoral politics a central part of its strategy. In advocating that strategy, progressive intellectual Anatol Lieven writes that we must redouble our efforts "to convince enough of the electorate to vote for climate change action." To get anything akin to a Green New Deal, he says, "the Democrats will need to win repeated elections by sweeping majorities."[32] Yet those very words reveal how unrealistic the strategy is. Despite major electoral efforts by liberal activists over the past two decades, there is virtually no chance of Democrats winning "repeated" and "sweeping majorities" for the foreseeable future, especially when the party leadership is hell-bent on running pro-corporate candidates. Even when a few Bernie-style candidates breach the fortress walls they are faced with formidable obstacles to enacting a robust environmentalist agenda, due both to other Democrats' corporate allegiances and the structural power of the fossil fuel industry. In short, if our strategy depends on Democrats "winning repeated elections by sweeping majorities," we will fail.

Obviously, elections are not trivial, nor is the state. Government action will play an essential role in any plausible pathway to climate stabilization. Yet electoral campaigns and lobbying are usually not the best ways for popular forces to influence what the state does. The Italian revolutionary Errico Malatesta made this point in 1899. He knew states wielded great power and could potentially deliver some positive reforms, but to attribute politicians' actions to elections and lobbying campaigns, as "electionists" did, was "to stop at the first appearance of things." He urged readers to look at the deeper forces that led to state reforms:

> In assessing the results of their method, the electionists make two mistakes which are at the root of persistent illusions. First, they mistake effect for cause, and attribute to the effectiveness of the electoral struggle and the parliamentary system what little good (oh, how little it is!) at rare times (oh, how rarely!) is done by elected bodies, while this is really the effect of popular pressure, to which the rulers concede what little they think is necessary to calm the people, anesthetize their energy and prevent them from demanding more. Second, they compare what is done in the electoral struggle with what would happen if nothing were done; while instead they should compare the results obtained from the fight at the ballot box against those obtained when other methods are followed, and with what might be achieved if all effort used to send representatives to power, from whom they expect reforms or proposed reforms, were employed in the fight to directly achieve what is desired.[33]

As Malatesta observed, movements have finite energies. Some leftists today assert that we must "combine mass action and electoral work," or that we should employ an "inside-outside strategy" of mass mobilization plus insider lobbying.[34] The problem with these formulas is their all-encompassing vagueness. By implying that all tactics are equally useful, they elide the constant practical choice facing activists about where to dedicate our time. Too often, the observation that electoral outcomes are of some consequence, or that progressive election campaigns sometimes inspire new activists, becomes the justification for channeling most of our energy into elections and lobbying. Meanwhile the organizing required to carry out successful collective action in our workplaces and communities is deprioritized. Rarely do we think to "compare the results obtained from the fight at the ballot box against those obtained when other methods are followed."

Some leftists argue that electoral campaigns, even if unsuccessful, can be used to build lasting movements. This is plausible but rare in practice. One staffer who worked on Bernie's 2016 campaign later noted that "electoral enterprises necessarily operate according to different sets of principles and imperatives than do movements. It is the job of political consultants and staffers to concern themselves with optics, staging, and their own 'punch lists,' rather than constructing lasting democratic organizations and grassroots networks."[35] When lasting movements do emerge after electoral campaigns, they are not usually dependent on people having participated in the campaigns. Candidates like Bernie can inspire and embolden people to take action in their workplaces and communities, in part because their defeat reveals the limits of electoral politics in a capitalist system. Thus, progressive candidates sometimes contribute indirectly to nonelectoral organizing. But this does not mean we should make electoral campaigns a primary focus of organizing. Workers can feel inspired by a candidate's message without engaging in "electoral work."[36] Bernie's message would have been equally inspiring either way.

Given the bleak outlook for defeating the fossil fuel industry via elections, what else can we do? What might Malatesta's "other methods" entail?

Confronting the Real Decision-Makers

An alternative approach would involve applying direct pressure on the elites who control energy-related investments. Priority targets would include the capitalists and state officials with the real power: polluters of course, but more importantly the banks, insurers, asset managers, pension funds, employers, regulators, and judges who are crucial to the polluters' ability to do business—all the elite decision-makers who enable climate destruction by financing, insuring, authorizing, and purchasing fossil fuel products. Our action will be most effective when it entails us collectively withholding the resources on which those elites depend—that is, our labor and money. The exercise of this "structural power" is possible due to the position of workers and consumers in the economic structure. Structural power is not the only type of power that movements wield, but it is the most potent. It cannot be easily countered by campaign donations or backroom deals in Congress. Movements that carry out sustained disruption of this type can also increase the likelihood of success in other realms, including elections and litigation against polluters.[37]

A virtue of this nonelectoral approach is that it doesn't require a majority, just a sizeable minority that is willing to take concerted and sustained action. The most powerful movements in US history, from abolitionism to civil rights, were the work of minorities. That doesn't mean we shouldn't also aim to reach the majority. Even the anarchist Malatesta, who promoted action by the radical minority, also stressed the need "to win over to our ideas an ever greater number of people."[38] But we cannot let survival depend on our ability to win over the majority.

Only a minority (45 percent) of US residents thinks the climate crisis is "an urgent problem." Stated another way, however, there are 117 million people US adults who view the climate crisis as an urgent problem. Other polling indicates that 48 percent of consumers, or 125 million people, believe in rewarding or punishing companies based on their environmental records, and that 14 percent—37 million people—would "personally engage in non-violent civil disobedience (e.g., sit-ins, blockades, or trespassing) against corporate or government activities that make global warming worse" if someone they "like and respect" recruited them.[39] Coordinated and sustained disruption by even a small fraction of these people can force enough financiers, investors, insurers, employers, judges, and regulators to defect from the fossil fuel cause that it cripples the industry. Our priority should be organizing these minorities to withhold their labor, money, and consent from the elite institutions with the power to confront fossil fuels. This approach is likely to draw in more people if we address their immediate material concerns as well as their concern about climate breakdown. Workers, utility customers, drivers, bus riders, indebted students, and residents breathing toxic air all have many reasons to hate polluters and big finance, and much to gain from a Green New Deal.

Some organizers in the climate and Indigenous movements have been taking this approach. They have sought to identify the elite actors most vulnerable to pressure and most able to give the movement what it wants, and have built people-powered movements that confront those elites. They've targeted coal companies, oil and gas drillers, pipeline operators, banks, insurance companies, and other economic elites who supply the market with fossil fuels. They've targeted the regulators and judges who make rulings about fossil fuel projects. They've forced utilities, manufacturers, and universities to reduce their consumption of fossil fuels. Many of these campaigns have been successful, suggesting that these unelected elites are often more vulnerable to movement pressure than politicians are.

Whereas governments have focused on supporting the growth of renewable energy and reducing fossil fuel demand—through measures like renewable energy mandates for utilities and carbon pricing measures—grassroots movements have also sought to restrict fossil fuel supply by limiting the expansion of production and infrastructure. Protests, lawsuits, and divestment campaigns directed at the industry and its financial enablers all target supply. These measures have been an essential complement to demand-side measures, for reasons that I explore in chapter 2. We need to attack from both the supply and demand sides.

One of the movement's most important achievements has been to increase the financial risk and uncertainty perceived by investors. Cutting demand for fossil fuels increases the risk of fossil fuel investments, at least in the medium to long term. On the supply side, if there is a chance that a fossil fuel project might be cancelled, substantially delayed, or subjected to new regulations or legal liabilities after the project breaks ground, investors will think twice before committing and, if they do, they may raise the cost of loans or insurance to factor in those risks. Many different developments can increase the risk associated with a project. A judge may rule against a pipeline or a drilling permit, delaying or precluding it. A regulator may refuse to rubber-stamp the project. Politicians may vote to reject it. The fact that projects often need the approval of multiple government entities at the local, state, and federal levels gives the movement multiple opportunities to block. Disruptive protests on-site may also delay work and raise costs by forcing companies to spend large sums on surveillance and repression. One of many examples came in July 2020 when Dominion Energy and Duke Energy cancelled construction of their Atlantic Coast Pipeline. The companies cited "too much legal uncertainty" and "years of delays and ballooning costs."[40] Even if that example is not the norm, the possibility that judges, regulators, or politicians might throw a wrench in the gears can be enough to deter investors and insurers. The fossil fuel industry and its spokespeople in government understand this threat. In February 2021 James Danly, a Trump appointee to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, objected to his colleagues' decision to give greater weight to public input in its decisions about pipeline projects. He warned that without legal certainty for investors "there would be no private financing, and without private financing there would be no projects."[41] And, though he didn't say it, some of that financing might be diverted into renewables, and public policymakers would be forced to boost support for renewables as well.

The movement has also threatened the viability of fossil fuels by pressuring banks, insurance companies, and other big financial players to phase out their loans, investments, and underwriting in the sector. The desertion of some financial institutions from fossil energy compounds the risk perceived by other investors. Again, the enemy's reaction is one measure of the movement's success. Fossil fuel servants in Washington and state governments have responded by trying to force private financial institutions to continue investing in fossil fuels. In 2020 Republican lawmakers and regulators complained that many financial institutions had recently adopted "policies against investing in new oil and gas operations," potentially thwarting hopes for new drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other locations. Moreover, "some of the nation's largest banks had stopped doing business altogether with one or more major energy industry categories." They fumed that lenders were "folding to activist environmental groups' pressure" and redirecting loans to other projects and sectors. The Trump administration responded by trying, unsuccessfully, to force Wall Street to fund drilling in the Arctic Refuge and to undertake other new fossil fuel initiatives. State-level bills to punish financial institutions that "discriminate" against fossil fuels proliferated in 2022.[42]

This desperate reaction is a hint of the movement's growing power. It indicates that other capitalists' allegiance to fossil fuels is tenuous and must be aggressively enforced by the industry, through coercion if necessary. For the movement it affirms the promise of a multipronged strategy that combines lawsuits against the fossil fuel and electricity industries, public protests targeting polluters, regulators, and politicians, and direct pressure on non-fossil-fuel capitalists, especially the financial sector. Targeting the politicians—the part that conventional wisdom tells us to emphasize—is just one piece of a successful strategy, and not the most important.

The movement alone is not the only factor helping to turn the tide against fossil fuels. Most capitalists and investors have self-interested reasons to abandon the sector. Prices for carbon-based fuels are notoriously volatile, even without movement-induced disruption. Climate destruction will also cost the world economy tens of trillions of dollars ($69 trillion by 2100, by Bank of America's own estimate).[43] Most of that cost will be passed along to working people, of course. But capitalists will be forced to bear some of it through higher costs for real estate, insurance, loans, and inputs, and reduced future sales.

However, non-fossil-fuel capitalists also have reasons to stick with fossil fuels. Diverse investors, including nonenergy corporations, hold stock in the industry. Many titans of industry sit on multiple boards of directors, sometimes in multiple industries. Lending relationships give banks a material stake in the continued profits of fossil fuel companies. And fossil fuels are still highly profitable given that polluters do not pay the costs of the harms they inflict on others.[44] All these factors disincentivize capitalist action against fossil fuels. They explain why, for example, most big banks have continued to fund dirty energy projects even as they increase lending for renewables.[45] It is unlikely that most capitalists will naturally conclude that their self-interest requires a rapid phaseout of fossil fuels. Or they'll come to that conclusion much too slowly.

But the way elites define and act upon their self-interest is subject to change based on the pressures they face. Elites throughout history have shifted their positions on vital issues when faced with disruptions. One source of disruption is opposition from other elites. As climate chaos escalates, more may come to see the fossil fuel industry as a parasite that undermines their profits. Geopolitical conflict may also compel changes in elite preferences. Competing imperial elites may create an emergency that requires strong government action, as when the Axis Powers led the United States to overhaul its economy during World War II (which shows that rapid economic overhaul is feasible). Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and China's massive investments in renewable energy have led some ruling-class sectors in the West to favor more funding for renewables. Geopolitical rivalry was likewise an important motivator in some prior "energy transitions," including the shifts to coal and oil for transportation.[46] Disruption may also be caused by nonelites, as when workers, consumers, or other groups take collective action in defense of their rights. Mass resistance, and elite attempts to prevent or suppress it, has contributed to some of the most important changes in human institutions.[47] Often disruption results from some combination of all these factors. Once it begins, other actors may respond in ways that compound the disruption, as when investors respond to antipipeline protests and adverse legal rulings by withdrawing their investments from pipeline projects. Seemingly small changes can lead to tipping points, with rapid cascading effects on political and economic systems.

Many variables will determine the fate of living things. The coming years will bring severe shocks, from economic meltdowns to resource wars to large-scale refugee flows, which will influence the decision-making of capitalists, state elites, and the public in ways not totally foreseeable. For almost everyone reading this book, the climate movement is the variable most within our power to control. The most promising approach for the movement involves targeting the ruling-class segments that are most likely and most able to oppose fossil fuels. By increasing the costs and risks to those sectors, the movement can propel private investors' shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy and alter those elites' stance on government policy.

Learning from Classic Movement Victories

Many of history's most powerful movements succeeded essentially as Errico Malatesta suggested: less through elections than through those "other methods," including "the fight to directly achieve what is desired." In case after case, impacted people used the collective leverage at their disposal. They withheld their labor and money, often accompanying those tactics with others that obstructed the functioning of business and state institutions. The leaders of these institutions sought to restore stability by granting concessions and ordering politicians to do the same.[48] This is true even of those classic examples from US history—abolitionism, the New Deal, civil rights—that are commonly cited today to justify a focus on electoral tactics.

Although those movements did engage in some electoral and legislative activities, and had some important figures working on the "inside," their most consequential actions—and most of their members—were focused on action in other realms. It was the mass disruption that gave the insiders leverage and catalyzed big changes in popular consciousness. Great upsurges in the workplaces and streets were usually a prerequisite for progress in the electoral realm. As historian Robert Brenner argues, the Left may be able "to translate the power accumulated through mass struggle into electoral victories and reform legislation; but the reverse is rarely if ever conceivable."[49]

All those movements lacked majority support for their activities at the time of victory. Contrary to the prevailing assumption that we must never alienate the majority, the movements' key actions were initiated by militant minorities, usually in defiance of existing laws. Organizers knew that if they had solid support among constituencies whose participation was essential to the system's functioning—enslaved Black people in the South, workers in GM auto factories, Black consumers in Birmingham—then winning over the public at large was not essential to success. This approach was not at odds with the goal of building majority support over the long term. All those movements ultimately won over most of US society. Similarly, a strategy that centers the work of a militant climate minority is fully compatible with educating the majority about the material benefits of a Green New Deal, from green jobs to affordable public transit to free childcare. Minority militancy and broad-based education can be complementary approaches. But the victorious movements of the past did not depend on persuading the majority. Usually the majority came around only after the movements had won. It was the radical action of minorities that catalyzed those shifts in public consciousness.

Focusing so much of the book on non-climate movements may seem a strange choice. A more obvious focus for historical study would be prior transitions from certain energy sources or technologies to others, which is the approach many scholars have taken. I discuss some relevant lessons of those transitions in the chapters ahead. However, most happened too gradually to be very encouraging in our present emergency.[50] We need to study movements that have rapidly neutralized the power of entrenched elites and forced large-scale changes in economic systems. When we reframe the question that way, movements that have targeted other sectors of capital are arguably more relevant than the history of energy transitions. Because the key question is one of political power, not technology, today's climate movement can learn from all past movements that have confronted and defeated capitalists. The relatively rapid gains made by some of history's non-climate movements offer important insights about how we can win a green transition.

For example, the abolition of slavery shows how a movement can defeat a capitalist elite (or quasi-capitalist elite) by seizing an opportunity generated by an existing division within the ruling class. US abolition happened because enslaved Black abolitionists, supported by nonenslaved abolitionists, took disruptive collective action against their oppressors. Key to their victory was their ability to exploit the split between northern industrialists and southern slaveholders. The intra-elite split alone did not bring change. By the mid-1800s slavery had become a fetter on the continued growth of capitalism, but northern capitalists' sense of self-interest was not enough to overthrow it. This was one of many historical cases in which a parasitic elite sector survived long after it had begun to harm the rest of the ruling class. This "irrational" system might have persisted for many more decades if not for the abolitionists.

The title *Abolishing Fossil Fuels* is meant to evoke the original abolitionists, for two reasons. One is their dignity and courage in the face of a radically evil system that seemed impervious to resistance. It is harder to despair over our current circumstances when we remember what our movement ancestors were up against. In addition to their moral example, the original abolitionists also show us how seemingly powerless people can win: by inflicting sustained disruption on elites in a way that exploits intra-elite tensions. By targeting elites outside the fossil fuel industry, we can force them to confront the fossil fuel parasites.

Outline of the Book

The chapters that follow are divided into two sections. Part I elaborates on my argument about the power of the fossil fuel industry and how the climate movement might overcome it. Chapter 1 examines the pillars of the industry's economic and political power. It begins with a brief historical overview of fossil fuels and the forces underlying energy transitions since the eighteenth century. Turning to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I trace the Republican Party's evolution into an unwavering servant of the fossil fuel industry. I also analyze why the industry's power has not been seriously undermined by Democratic politicians in Washington.

Chapter 2 examines climate wins. I focus on campaigns against coal-fired power plants, oil and gas drilling, and pipelines. Grassroots movements have been one of several important factors in these victories. The outcomes have also depended on the configuration of ruling-class forces, for instance whether or not a particular sector or firm has acquired a material stake in stronger regulations. Recent climate victories come nowhere close to ending the climate emergency, but they offer clues about how we might abolish fossil fuels over the next several decades.

Part II consists of four historical chapters about non-climate movements that triumphed against capitalists: US abolitionism, New Deal labor reforms, Black freedom struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, and campaigns against local air pollution in the 1960s. The first three examples are very well known, and often cited by climate organizers, but the sources of their success are often misunderstood. Some common patterns emerge in my reading of these movements. In each case, a radical minority forced some elites to confront their more parasitic colleagues. Usually, the movement's pressure was locally concentrated in the sense of targeting one or a few companies, industries, or subnational political jurisdictions; success at the local level then paved the way for larger-scale change. Each of these chapters concludes with a section on implications for the climate movement.

Chapter 3 shows how the abolitionist movement forced northern capitalists and southern slaveholders into open confrontation. Though the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was the immediate catalyst for secession, the most important abolitionist activity of the prior forty years was nonelectoral in nature. Enslaved people fled their oppressors, their free comrades sheltered them, and abolitionist writers and orators railed constantly against accommodation with the slaveholders. That resistance, and the desperate reactions from slaveholders, set the stage for the rise of the Republican Party and the military conflagration that created an opening for full emancipation. Once war began, the mass flight of the enslaved led the Union leadership to reluctantly endorse emancipation. The general lesson is that disruptive action by a minority of the population can push some elites to confront others.

Chapter 4 addresses the New Deal of the 1930s, particularly workers' fight for collective bargaining rights. I focus on the Great Sit-Down Strike of 1936–37 at General Motors auto plants, which paved the way for unionization in the mass production industries. This victory resulted primarily from mass disruption spearheaded by radical organizers rather than from electoral mobilization by labor unions. Workers acted courageously and creatively to bring their workplaces to a halt. The resulting disruption forced their employers to alter their behavior and to acquiesce to labor laws that had been unenforceable to that point.

The victory over GM also reveals how reforms at the national level are often only possible when the key changes have already been forced upon elites at lower levels. When movements win a localized victory over a powerful opponent, national- or even international-level reform becomes more likely. The local victories inspire other oppressed people to take action elsewhere, which is what happened after the Great Sit-Down Strike. A local victory also alters the calculus of capitalist decision-making, diminishing business resistance to change at higher levels and giving the defeated capitalists an incentive to impose the same changes on their competitors. This dynamic appears in various forms throughout the book.

These lessons are reinforced by the history of Black freedom struggles in the 1950s and 1960s, the subject of chapter 5. The conventional explanation for the movement's success is that nonviolent demonstrators in the Jim Crow South won the sympathy of northern liberals, who then acted to end segregation. That narrative is deeply misleading. Like with the workers of the 1930s, the Black movement's political power stemmed from the ingenuity, militancy, and resiliency of locally rooted organizations. Those organizations were most effective when they inflicted direct costs on capitalists, such as Birmingham retailers. The strategic centrality of boycotts and other economic disruption is often overlooked in post facto accounts of the movement against Jim Crow. The climate movement could benefit from intensifying its economic pressure campaigns against capitalists.

Chapter 6 examines the fight for clean air in the twentieth century. The 1970 Clean Air Act forms the legislative centerpiece. Though the act was far from adequate, it was perhaps the strongest environmental reform in US history. Furthermore, it has largely survived polluters' attempts to eviscerate it. I analyze why significant air quality protections were achieved and maintained. In brief, the law originated in earlier state-level reforms in California. Those reforms responded to the fears of certain sectors of capital that perceived the smog crisis as a threat to their ability to attract workers, customers, and investors. Once the California reforms and then the Clean Air Act took root, they helped expand the number and power of capitalists with a material interest in the maintenance of regulations. Environmental activists accelerated this process in multiple ways, including through petitions and protests targeting regulators, coalition-building with labor unions, and dogged monitoring of polluters. Electoral and legislative mobilization at the local and state levels complemented those tactics.

Chapter 6 also profiles a movement for clean air in the workplace. In 1969 West Virginia coal miners waged a historic series of strikes against the coal dust that was sickening and killing them. The strikes were "political" in that the workers struck against their employers as a way of winning changes in government policy. They forced their state legislature to pass a new health and safety law, which then set the stage for landmark federal legislation. Though not typically considered part of the modern environmental movement, the coal miners' struggle holds lessons for building the climate movement. It shows that workers who withhold their labor have unique power to force rapid changes in government policy and thus demonstrates what might be achieved if we can unite the climate and labor movements. The 1969 coal miners' strikes push us to reflect on how we might build that unity.

The book's main focus is how the movement can contribute to rapid decarbonization. In the conclusion I turn attention from the pace of the transition to how the costs and benefits are distributed. Human institutions and hierarchies profoundly shape the ways that societies respond to ecological crisis, determining how much suffering accompanies climate disaster and who must endure it. Elites will invariably seek to pass along the costs of both climate chaos and decarbonization to anyone they think they can force to shoulder the burdens: workers, consumers, renters, patients, caregivers, women, children, elders, disabled persons, tuition-payers, communities of color, refugees, the Global South as a whole. Far-right members of the elite will escalate their demagogic attacks on the victims of climate violence and will attract mass followings in affluent countries. Our solidarity is therefore more vital than ever. Building that solidarity means prioritizing both decarbonization and the concerns for equity that are central to the "climate justice" movement. I analyze two dimensions of climate justice, resistance to environmental racism and the struggle for worker rights, and offer some thoughts on why, and how, communities of color and the labor movement must be central to the climate fight. This is not only the morally right approach, it's strategically imperative for our movement.

By hope I do not mean the baseless optimism that someone else—God, nature, engineers, or some other savior—will ultimately fix things. This blind hopefulness is harmful to the movement. The sort of hopefulness that is helpful comes from the awareness that salvation is possible if rising numbers of people take collective action. On "false" versus "constructive" hope see Jennifer R. Marlon, Brittany Bloodhart, Matthew T. Ballew, Justin Rolfe-Redding, Connie Roser-Renouf, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Edward Maibach, "How Hope and Doubt Affect Climate Change Mobilization," *Frontiers in Communication* 4 (2019): 1–19. On anger, hope, and other emotions, see also Rebecca Leber, "There's Been a Shift in How We Think about Climate Change" (interview with Lorraine Whitmarsh), *Vox*, August 31, 2023.

Chi Xu, T.A. Kohler, T.M. Lenton, J.C. Svenning, and M. Scheffer, "Future of the Human Climate Niche," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 21 (2020): 11350–55; DARA and the Climate Vulnerable Forum, *Climate Vulnerability Monitor: A Guide to the Cold Calculus of a Hot Planet*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Fundación DARA Internacional, 2012), 17; Karn Vohra, Alina Vodonos, Joel Schwartz, Eloise A. Marais, Melissa P. Sulprizio, and Loretta J. Mickley, "Global Mortality from Outdoor Fine Particle Pollution Generated by Fossil Fuel Combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem," *Environmental Research* 195 (2021): table 1; International Union for Conservation of Nature, *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* (January 2021). Another recent study predicts 83 million deaths by 2100 as a result of global heating—a conservative figure that includes only "temperature-related mortality." R. Daniel Bressler, "The Mortality Cost of Carbon," *Nature Communications* 12, no. 4467 (2021): 7.

Johan Rockström (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research) quoted in Damian Carrington, "World on Brink of Five 'Disastrous' Climate Tipping Points, Study Finds," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2022; United Nations Environment Programme, *Emissions Gap Report 2023: Broken Record—Temperatures Hit New Highs, Yet World Fails to Cut Emissions (Again)* (Nairobi, 2023).

Fifty-six and 51 percent, respectively, in a ten-country poll of people ages 16–25. Caroline Hickman, Elizabeth Marks, Panu Pihkala, Susan Clayton, R. Eric Lewandowski, Elouise E. Mayall, Britt Wray, Catriona Mellor, and Lise van Susteren, "Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey," *Lancet Planetary Health* 5, no. 12 (2021): e867–e868. On fossil fuel industry plans, see Damian Carrington and Matthew Taylor, "Revealed: The 'Carbon Bombs' Set to Trigger Catastrophic Climate Breakdown," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2022.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Summary for Policymakers," in *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report* (Geneva, 2023), 33. Other sources like the International Energy Agency and the International Renewable Energy Agency offer different calculations but broadly agree on the magnitude.

This is obviously a thumbnail sketch of the necessary policies. Other urgent measures include plugging methane leaks, protecting forests, safeguarding Indigenous sovereignty, and reducing meat consumption. For accessible sources on policy see Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin with C.J. Polychroniou, *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (London: Verso, 2020); James K. Boyce, *Economics for People and the Planet: Inequality in the Era of Climate Change* (London: Anthem, 2019); Jeremy Brecher, *18 Strategies for a Green New Deal: How to Make the Climate Mobilization Work* (Takoma Park, MD: Labor Network for Sustainability, 2019); The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021); Civil Society Equity Review, *The Imperative of Cooperation: Steps toward an Equitable Response to the Climate Crisis* (Manila: CSO Equity Review Coalition, 2022).

On pandemic subsidies see Marina Andrijevic, Carl-Friedrich Schleussner, Matthew J. Gidden, David L. McCollum, and Joeri Rogelj, "COVID-19 Recovery Funds Dwarf Clean Energy Investment Needs," *Science* 370, no. 6514 (2020): 298–300. I address the other cases later.

International Energy Agency, *Net Zero by 2050: A Roadmap for the Global Energy Sector* (Paris: IEA, 2021), 14. Getting net emissions to zero may require additional innovations and some lifestyle changes (e.g., less flying and meat), but most emissions could be eliminated with technology available now plus changes in land use.

Robin Hahnel, *A Participatory Economy* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2022); CounterPower, *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2020). These books are not guilty of the simplistic analysis I am critiquing.

Wherever possible this approach should entail building noncapitalist alternatives in the present, from public ownership of electricity production to worker-owned enterprises. Usually, however, we will need to force changes in the behavior of capitalists without overthrowing them.

Boyce, *Economics*, 3.

Moreover, even another Great Depression would not in itself cut carbon emissions on the scale necessary, as suggested by the minor drop in emissions seen during recent recessions. Part of the problem is that many proponents of degrowth misunderstand what growth actually is. Economic growth refers to an increase in value and is not synonymous with environmental throughput, meaning the carbon or other physical matter discharged into the biosphere. It is quite possible to end carbon emissions and other pollution while increasing the value produced in an economy. Recent progress in "decoupling" growth from carbon emissions is apparent in many jurisdictions; aggressive policies would accelerate that progress. See Robin Hahnel, "The Growth Imperative: Beyond Assuming Conclusions," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 45, no. 1 (2012): 24–41; Robin Hahnel, "Environmental Sustainability in a Sraffian Framework," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 49, no. 3 (2017): 477–88; C.J. Polychroniou, "Degrowth Policies Cannot Avert Climate Crisis. We Need a Green New Deal" (interview with Robert Pollin), *Truthout*, July 3, 2021; Corinne Le Quéré, Jan Ivar Korsbakken, Charlie Wilson, Jale Tosun, Robbie Andrew, Robert J. Andres, Josep G. Canadell, Andrew Jordan, Glen P. Peters, and Detlef P. van Vuuren, "Drivers of Declining CO2 Emissions in 18 Developing Economies," *Nature Climate Change* 9 (2019): 213–17.

For instance, a 2018 book argues that there is no longer "any hope for meaningful carbon mitigation" and claims, wrongly, that "there is virtual consensus among climate scientists that we have already failed" at stopping "runaway climate change." Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2018), 26, 166.

Quotes from, respectively, Bob Kopp in "'A Code Red for Humanity': Major UN Report Warns of Climate Catastrophe If Urgent Action Not Taken," *Democracy Now!*, August 9, 2021; and Jeni Miller of the World Health Organization in "Climate Crisis = Health Emergency: Air Pollution, Pandemics & Displacement Make the World Sick," *Democracy Now!*, November 12, 2021. For a related warning, see Sasha Lilley, David McNally, Eddie Yuen, and James Davis, *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

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Jeremy Brecher, *Against Doom: A Climate Insurgency Manual* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017), 63.

Varshini Prakash, "People Power and Political Power," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Prakash and Guido Girgenti (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 142.

On liberalism's failure to arrest the spread of far-right politics see Johanna Brenner and Robert Brenner, "Reagan, the Right and the Working Class," *Against the Current*, Winter 1981, 29–35; Gregory Albo, Leo Panitch, and Colin Leys, eds., *Socialist Register 2022: New Polarizations, Old Contradictions: The Crisis of Centrism* (Delhi: Aakar, 2021); Kevin A. Young, "Trump, Biden, and Why Elections Don't Bring Bigger Policy Changes," *Political Power and Social Theory* 39 (2023): 7–29; Kim Moody, *Breaking the Impasse: Electoral Politics, Mass Action, and the New Socialist Movement in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2022). On the electoral weakness of corporate Democrats' strategy see Richard Lachmann, Michael Schwartz, and Kevin A. Young, "No Co-

Sponsor of 'Medicare for All' Has Lost Reelection in the Past Decade (Even in GOP-Leaning Districts)," *Common Dreams*, December 21, 2020.

Quote from Moody, *Breaking*, 50. Of the six Democratic incumbents who lost their primaries in 2022, five were in newly redrawn districts; in only two cases were the victors more progressive than their opponents, and one of the two lost the general election.

Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564. See also Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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"Term of the Senate," June 26, 1787, *Founders Online,* US National Archives; "Federalist No. 10," November 23, 1787. See also Michael J. Klarman, *The Framers' Coup: The Making of the United States Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Kevin A. Young, Tarun Banerjee, and Michael Schwartz, *Levers of Power: How The 1% Rules and What the 99% Can Do about It* (London: Verso, 2020), and "Capital Strikes as a Corporate Political Strategy: The Structural Power of Business in the Obama Era," *Politics & Society* 46, no. 1 (2018): 3–28. Contrary to mainstream economic thought, capitalists' investment decisions are largely shaped by subjective political considerations—the level of "business confidence" in government. Even the magazine *Bloomberg Businessweek* notes the subjective dimension in capitalist decisions: "Our review of data going back to 1950 considered a host of variables related to investment, including the output gap, business confidence, capital depreciation, and interest rates. It showed that business confidence, or what John Maynard Keynes liked to call 'animal spirits,' along with the basic laws of supply and demand, are more important drivers of investment."

See Dara Lind, "The NYPD 'Slowdown' That's Cut Arrests in New York by Half, Explained," *Vox*, January 6, 2015; Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Michael D. Shear, "Trump Loyalists May Undercut Biden's Agenda on Immigration," *New York Times*, February 4, 2021.

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Robert Brenner, "The Paradox of Social Democracy: The American Case," in *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook, 1985*, ed. Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil, and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1985), 68. Recent experience in Latin America supports Brenner's thesis. Most progressive electoral wins since 1998 have come on the heels of mass mobilizations outside the electoral sphere.

Some scholars cite the slow pace of past transitions to argue that rapid decarbonization is impossible. Some even use this history to argue that governments should avoid aggressive market interventions that target polluters and instead focus on encouraging individuals to conserve energy. See for instance Vaclav Smil, *Energy Transitions: Global and National Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA:

Praeger, 2017); Sarah Nelson and Julian M. Allwood, “The Technological and Social Timelines of Climate Mitigation: Lessons from 12 Past Transitions,” *Energy Policy* 152 (2021): 1–25. This is an example of being excessively bound by history. Not everything that hasn’t been done before is impossible. Prior to 1939 there had been no industrial conversion program of the scale and rapidity seen in World War II. The Allied Powers did not thus conclude that the effort was in vain.

PART I

Breaking the Fossil Fuel Chokehold

CHAPTER ONE

"We Provide the Products on Which Society Depends"

The Industry's Power of Obstruction

WHEN JOE BIDEN ENTERED THE WHITE HOUSE IN JANUARY 2021, MANY ENVIRONMENTALISTS were pleasantly surprised by his first moves. He revoked the permit for the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline, rejoined the Paris climate accord, announced a moratorium on new oil and gas leases on federal lands, and promised a slew of additional policies to promote renewables and reduce government subsidies to fossil fuels. The industry's stock prices tumbled. One oil CEO told *Bloomberg News* that "the industry is aghast at these changes," which were "more direct, more fierce and quicker than what folks expected."[1]

A year later, the headlines of the business press told a different story. The *Financial Times* said "Big Oil Has Nothing to Complain about under Joe Biden," while *Bloomberg* declared "President Biden's Climate Ambitions Are All But Dead." Biden's signature climate and social policy legislation, known as Build Back Better, had been killed in the Senate by unified opposition from all Republicans and one Democrat. In June 2022 the far-right supermajority on the Supreme Court gutted the regulatory power of the Environmental Protection Agency. The *Bloomberg* verdict ultimately proved a bit premature, given that Congress passed a pared-down version of Build Back Better in the August 2022 Inflation Reduction Act. That law included hundreds of billions in tax credits for renewable energy, making it the most significant US climate legislation to date. Nonetheless, it was a very low bar. The 2022 law still did not go nearly far enough and contained lavish gifts to polluters as a way of winning over fossil fuel Democrats like Senator Joe Manchin.[2]

The most obvious obstruction was fossil fuel producers' chokehold on the Senate. Given the Democrats' razor-thin Senate majority and Republicans' unified allegiance to fossil fuels, Build Back Better could not pass without approval from right-wing Democrats like Manchin, himself a West Virginia coal baron. But the industry's conduits in the Senate were just one of several chokepoints. The foundation of its political power was its control over energy and a major share of jobs and tax revenues. The mere threat of price hikes, layoffs, and capital flight was often enough to get Biden, other officials, and other industries to obey. This "structural" power enabled and amplified the other weapons in the industry's arsenal, from campaign donations to litigation. It was a potent weapon for use even against Democrats who lacked close ties to the industry. Congress and the courts did not force Biden to reopen federal lands for oil and gas leases; he did so instead for fear of being blamed for rising fossil fuel prices. Fossil fuel leaders understood their structural power. In January 2021 one industry consultant predicted that "Biden in office may be less aggressive about trying to force change than his campaign rhetoric implied," due to both the threat of litigation and "because administrations do not want to hamstring economic development"—a euphemism for a capital strike in which industry withdraws investments in protest of government policy.[3] The *Financial Times* noted the central contradiction facing climate reform efforts: "that growing pressure to act on climate change fails to acknowledge the still robust demand for the goods that these companies create." As one executive from the coal-dependent steel industry warned in May 2021, "We still need to provide the products on which society depends."[4] It was a version of the same threat issued by capitalists whenever government tries to protect workers, consumers, or the environment: *back off or we'll stop hiring, lending, and producing.*

The steel executive's statement was an accurate observation about society's dependence on the industry's products, but it failed to mention polluters' dogged efforts to ensure that society *stays* dependent on those products. At the same time as they were warning that Biden's policies would raise fuel prices and jeopardize US jobs, big polluters were also trying to kill Build Back Better, precisely because the bill's support for renewables would have reduced the economy's dependence on fossil fuels. They also opposed fiscal measures that would compensate consumers for the rising cost of oil and gas, such as a windfall tax on profits or carbon dividends that could be redistributed to households—the absence of which limited public enthusiasm for policy measures that might raise oil and gas prices.[5] Keeping society materially dependent on fossil fuels is the key to the industry's political power, which explains its full-court press in opposition to Build Back Better. "We're using every tool at our disposal to work against these proposals," said the CEO of the American Petroleum Institute. The tools included heavy campaign donations, lobbying, and advertising to ensure that Manchin and all Republicans voted the right way. The power of those tools was amplified by ominous forecasts about capital disinvestment. Underlying every warning that Build Back Better would "inhibit job creation" or "make the US less competitive" was the threat of a capital strike that could harm workers, consumers, and government. In this way the industry's multiple weapons reinforced each other and allowed it to preserve the potency of disinvestment threats in the future. As UN Secretary General António Guterres said soon after the defeat of Build Back Better, "fossil fuel producers and financiers have humanity by the throat."[6]

This momentous episode is a microcosm of how the fossil fuel industry exercises political power. Just as employers routinely use "job blackmail" to resist demands by their workers, polluters blackmail the rest of society into letting them go virtually unregulated.[7] Their incessant threats of higher energy prices and disinvestment—which translate into layoffs, lower tax revenues for government, and angry voters—help to discipline politicians and regulators and to rally other capitalist sectors around the fossil fuel agenda. The energy industry's threats carry even more weight than other capitalists', for every industry and person in society is dependent on the steady provision of energy. Power outages and price hikes are felt all across the economy, and viscerally.

The exercise of this coercion does not necessarily involve foregoing profits just to send a political message. Companies often bluff when they threaten to disinvest. When disinvestment or price increases do occur, they frequently reflect nonpolitical causes. The fuel price increases of 2021–22 owed mainly to foreign causes, including Saudi decisions and Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and to US sanctions on Russian exports. In response the Biden administration pled with US companies to boost their drilling and reversed his earlier promises about federal leasing. The companies' refusal to oblige was more an economic than a political decision. As *Bloomberg* reported, many were already enjoying "record profits from rising prices despite pumping less crude than before the pandemic." Investors were reluctant to allow new drilling for fear of lowering prices. Top oil companies also cited "the rising costs of piping, trucks, and labor" as an obstacle.[8]

Publicly, though, the industry blamed Biden. His "historic hostility toward fossil fuels" was alleged to be the primary roadblock to getting prices down. This argument ignored the fact that most oil and gas drilling (76 percent of oil, 89 percent of gas) takes place on territories not controlled by the federal government and that many federal leases were not even producing. Nor would new drilling have any impact on output or prices for many months, and even then the impact would be minimal.[9] Investments in new infrastructure would take years to have any effect. But whenever fossil fuel prices rise or investment stagnates for any reason, industry invariably blames politicians and regulators, and this analysis is broadcast far and wide by media and by fossil fuel representatives in government. Thus the exercise of structural power by the industry is partly dependent on its propaganda. The credible threat of disinvestment or price hikes—or at least the threat that reformers will get blamed for those things—is a powerful deterrent to reform. This structural power is enhanced by other tactics, particularly campaign donations that allow polluters to place their representatives in government. Those representatives block measures that might reduce society's dependence on fossil fuels. By ensuring that fossil fuels remain society's primary energy source, the industry retains its structural power of obstruction.[10]

This chapter analyzes the fossil fuel industry's power. The first section briefly reviews the industry's history from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries, showing how it came to possess such awesome control over workers, consumers, government, and other capitalists. My summary highlights its parasitic interaction with the rest of society, including both the population in general and, more surprisingly, its long-term harm to other capitalists who found themselves unable to resist it.

The next two sections examine how the industry wields power over Republicans and Democrats, respectively. While energy policy has stayed remarkably consistent across administrations, the mechanisms of industry control over the two parties are somewhat different. Republicans are more dependent on fossil cash for their campaigns and are more likely to have career ties and major stock holdings in fossil fuels. Democrats are more inclined to try to balance the interests of fossil capital with those of other capitalists. This divergence of platform has become more acute since the late twentieth century, as the Republican Party has arrived at an unapologetic consensus in favor of climate destruction. To thwart Democrats' reform ambitions the industry must frequently employ other weapons, including disinvestment threats, litigation, and congressional obstruction.

The chapter's conclusion examines why other sectors of the ruling class have been so slow to revolt against the fossil fuel industry's parasitism, as a prelude into the next chapter's analysis of how they might be pushed to do so.

The Path to Fossil Fuel Power

The adoption of new energy sources and technologies has usually depended not just on technical efficiency but on social and political considerations. In many cases capitalists choose to adopt technologies that are less efficient than others because they allow for greater control over the labor force and thus greater profits. For instance, postwar US manufacturers' preference for numerical control of machine tools was driven by a desire to reduce the power of skilled machinists on the shop floor. Employers and engineers were honest about it. "The objective is to take all skill out of the operator. That means less influence over production for the guy on the floor," said one manager in 1978. Alternative technologies were rejected because they did "not contribute toward close production control by management," as one engineer of numerical control wrote in 1960.[11]

Technologies that get adopted are often "socially" inefficient as well, when they benefit their owners but inflict enormous costs on others. The burning of fossil fuels is an obvious example. The combustion of subterranean carbon deposits unlocked tremendous quantities of stored energy, allowing for new economies of scale, rapid transportation, and other benefits. Some of the benefits trickled down to the general public. But the harms imposed on past, present, and especially future generations make fossil fuels radically inefficient from a social perspective. Indeed, fossil fuels are the most parasitic industry in human history.

The world's current addiction to fossil fuels was never predestined by superior efficiency or human nature. Rather, the global adoption of coal, oil, and gas was the outcome of power struggles between elites and masses and among competing elites, in which the victors succeeded in forcing others to pay the costs of their actions. Fossil fuels were chosen because they enhanced the power and profits of key elite sectors. The beneficiaries were not limited to those who controlled the resources themselves, which were unevenly distributed and thus more easily monopolized than sunlight, wind, or water. Other capitalists realized that fossil fuels could enhance their control within their enterprises and in society broadly. State elites, particularly in Britain and the United States, also came to see fossil fuels as conferring geopolitical advantages over their global rivals. The physical nature of fossil fuels—the sheer density of potential energy they contained—facilitated that process, but it was not the main reason why they came to dominate.[12]

The adoption of the coal-powered steam engine is a case in point. James Watt patented his invention in 1784 but British textile industrialists did not widely adopt it for four more decades, preferring instead to rely on the water wheel. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, though, manufacturers contended with a rising problem of worker militancy. In that context they decided to automate the spinning process as a way to undercut the power of skilled spinners. The self-acting mule, powered by steam, deskilled the labor of spinning and thus made the laborer expendable.

Weaving was also automated through the adoption of the coal-fired power loom, which employers embraced to prevent theft of materials by starving weavers who had previously woven their fabric by hand in their homes. The power loom enabled employers to concentrate the labor force "under more immediate control and management," as one employers' committee noted in 1834. The steam-powered automation of spinning and weaving was a perfect solution to "the vexatious conduct of the work-people," in the words of one supervisor. The US transition to coal after the Civil War was similarly undertaken in large part to concentrate and control the workforce.[13] State elites came to favor coal for their own reasons. In both Europe and the United States the transition was heavily subsidized by governments seeking to achieve military and commercial superiority over rivals. That impulse was reinforced by the rise of railroads and the shift of naval fleets to steam power, which simultaneously motivated and enabled new rounds of colonial conquest.[14]

The later shift toward oil for use in transportation and industry presents a variation on this pattern. Worker resistance in the coal industry was a primary reason for the transition. The sector became a center of labor union activity in Britain, the United States, and beyond. Coal workers' power stemmed from the geographic concentration of production and the ease with which they could disrupt mining and transport. The expansion of global production and the use of oil pipelines (as opposed to rail transport) became a way to avoid labor disruption.[15] This transition was hastened by inter-imperial competition after 1898 as the United States, Britain, and Germany shifted their navies from coal to oil in an attempt to gain military advantage. Once those governments embarked on that path, securing oil deposits for future use became a central aim of domestic and foreign policy. The new oil magnates learned they could portray that aim as a strategic national interest rather than a narrow sectoral one.[16] By the mid-twentieth century it was common sense among state elites that US policy in the Middle East should be oriented toward preserving "a continued flow of oil to the West on reasonable terms," which meant allying with reactionary despots dedicated to preserving "the status quo in their countries."[17]

The oil economy enabled, and in turn benefited from, the growth of oil-dependent industries with their own interests in the expansion of oil. The US auto industry was the most important, itself stimulating other sectors like steel, glass, and rubber. Companies in numerous other sectors invested capital in vehicles and other equipment that ran on oil. The nation's early electrical grid was quickly dominated by oil's cousin, coal. The increased reliance of the economy on fossil fuels produced what social scientists call path dependence: as diverse actors commit resources to a particular path it becomes harder and harder to change course. Energy scholars describe a "carbon lock-in" effect, referring to the new structure of investments, infrastructures, and institutions that capitalists across the economy would be disincentivized from trying to dismantle. Fossil fuel production would always be a tiny fraction of total economic output, but fossil fuels would be crucial inputs almost everywhere.[18]

With economic power came political power. The dependence of so many other sectors on fossil fuels gave the industry's voice tremendous weight among politicians. It helped ensure that the country's transportation system would be designed in the industry's interests. The political agenda of highway expansion, urban and suburban sprawl, and the underfunding of mass transit—on top of lavish direct subsidies for fossil fuels, auto, and related industries—drew support from a broad coalition of industries that joined in the lobbying efforts.[19] The fossil fuel industry was also able to enlist other capitalists to amplify its threats about the destructive economic impact of environmental protections.[20]

Carbon lock-in was not inescapable, however, and the industry knew it. In 1973 James Akins, the director of the State Department's Office of Fuels and Energy, warned oil executives about the danger of alternatives: "There is one spectre which will always lurk in every producer's mind: the development of new sources of energy which will make oil irrelevant." Akins was optimistic that the threat was at least a decade or two in the future. Before that point, "it is unlikely that any alternative source of energy will be available in sufficient quantities to preclude substantial increases in hydrocarbon prices." But he did predict that after the turn of the century, "hydrocarbon consumption for fuel might be expected to decline in absolute terms" as hydrocarbon use would be limited to the production of manufactured goods like plastics.[21] Akins himself actually welcomed this prospect, perhaps because he favored an energy strategy that would serve the entire capitalist class. But his audience at the American Petroleum Institute did not. As scholar Richard Adams wrote around the same time, "If it were possible to make oil less important in the energy mix, then the [industry] would be less powerful; but it is specifically trying to avoid that eventuality." One of the oil industry's responses was to buy up coal, natural gas, and nuclear energy assets to ensure that lower prices in those sectors would not undercut its own sales.[22] It was one tactic in the industry's efforts to impede the development of alternatives or at least stop them from becoming too price competitive.

Akins and Adams were writing at a crucial moment. The oil price shocks of the 1970s heightened the industry's fears that societies would seek to overcome their dependence on fossil fuels. High prices led to greater political support for renewables, symbolized by President Jimmy Carter's installation of solar panels on the White House. But even before Reagan took office and doubled down on fossil fuels (and removed the solar panels), the industry had reasserted its stranglehold. Carter criticized US reliance on oil, but his promotion of solar energy didn't go very far. He acknowledged "the overwhelming dependence" of the West "on oil supplies from the Middle East" and proclaimed the US commitment to use "any means necessary, including military force," to safeguard "the vital interests of the United States" in "the Persian Gulf region." The Carter Doctrine would be praised and reiterated by both parties in the coming decades, motivating a nearly unbroken campaign of mass murder, from the carnage of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s to more well-known examples in the decades since.[23] Meanwhile the oil industry, and the fossil fuel industries more broadly, used their political influence to ensure that renewable energy did not expand significantly.[24]

The US response to the oil price hikes of the 1970s reflects a key measure of the industry's power: its ability to control how crises are interpreted and addressed. This includes the power to constrict the range of remedies pursued by policymakers. Rather than aggressively promoting solar and wind energy or measures such as public transit that would reduce overall energy consumption, the US government responded by accelerating down the fossil-fueled path to destruction.[25] An even greater measure of power is the ability to prevent the acknowledgment that a crisis even exists. The industry's systematic obfuscation of climate science began around the same time that the US government was asserting its right to unilateral intervention in the Middle East.

It was of course not able to suppress *all* discussion of the growing climate crisis. Starting with Lyndon Johnson, every US president received expert briefings on how emissions were heating the planet. Johnson warned Congress about "a steady increase in carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels," which his Science Advisory Committee said "will almost certainly cause significant changes in the temperature." Serious research programs focused on atmospheric warming were established in the 1970s.[26] In 1988 the UN sponsored the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and in 1992 the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro ostensibly committed the powerful states to confronting the crisis. Nor was the industry able to prevent the formation of a virtual consensus among scientists. But it could sow enough doubt about the science, and enlist enough politicians to amplify that doubt, to help preclude serious policy reform.[27] Climate denialism became the deadliest lie in human history.

Outside the public spotlight, the perpetrators often admitted what they were doing. From the 1970s onward Exxon was privately "aware of contemporary climate science, contributed to that science, and predicted future global warming correctly."[28] Decades later a leaked report from JP Morgan Chase acknowledged that "the Earth is on an unsustainable trajectory" and that dramatic changes were needed "if the human race is going to survive." Naturally such acknowledgments have not been accompanied by any major change of trajectory. JP Morgan remains the world's top funder of fossil fuel operations. In a similar vein, the Trump administration's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recommended freezing the Obama-era plan to tighten fuel economy standards. It acknowledged that the world was on track for a catastrophic temperature increase of 4°C by 2100, but it reasoned that the extra emissions that would result from maintaining existing fuel economy rules "are extremely small compared with total projected future climate change."[29] Since polluters are going to destroy society anyways, why shouldn't they be able to gorge themselves for a few more years?

In the early twenty-first century this thinking became the consensus in the Republican Party, which would oppose tooth and nail the measures that were necessary "if the human race is going to survive." A more genteel version of this thinking prevailed in most other elite circles, including on Wall Street. It was a consensus which, for lack of a stronger term, can only be called genocidal.[30]

Building a Genocidal Consensus

Cementing the consensus took work. Republican politicians had occasionally displayed some independence from polluters. Richard Nixon presided over the most significant environmental reforms in US history, creating the EPA and signing the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Clean Water Act in the face of significant business opposition. George H.W. Bush approved important amendments that strengthened the Clean Air Act. He also signed the 1992 treaty establishing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which he touted as "beginning the response to climate change."[31] And in a vote unthinkable in later years, the Senate approved the treaty, with many Republicans voting yes.

These reforms were driven partly by electoral considerations. According to the EPA's first chief of staff, Nixon supported the EPA to score points against Democrats. He hoped it would "neutralize the issue that Senator Edmund Muskie (D-ME), Nixon's presumed Democratic challenger in the 1972 election, would be looking to ride to the presidency." Bush's 1988 campaign likewise promised that he would be "the environmental president."[32] Nixon and Bush's insincerity is apparent from their other actions on behalf of polluters. Nixon tried to appoint the president of Ford Motor Company as the first EPA administrator.[33] Bush's delegation to global climate talks "worked diligently to ensure that the agreement would not commit the US to specific emission targets" nor to "transferring funds to the developing world."[34] The Republican president who came in between, Ronald Reagan, appointed an EPA chief who sought to "demolish the nation's environmental management capacity," in the words of a former EPA official.[35] Nonetheless, Republicans' opportunism indicates that they felt vulnerable to electoral pressures on climate and other environmental issues, and that they had to deliver some environmentalist reforms to win elections.

It wouldn't last. The party soon unleashed a concerted war on the environmental protections enacted in earlier decades. Half-hearted Republican interest in addressing global warming in the early 1990s gave way to unequivocal opposition two decades later. Ambivalent respect for climate science was replaced by denialist propaganda. The impetus behind this shift was the fossil fuel industry's mobilization. As the prospect of climate reform increased in the 1980s and 1990s, the industry recognized it as a major threat to its profits.

George W. Bush's ascension to the presidency in 2000 opened the door to the industry's direct colonization of the federal government. Having its people in key decision-making roles ensured that energy supply and pricing problems would be interpreted the right way. In early 2001 the California electricity crisis was the pressing topic. Bush appointed an Energy Task Force, headed by former Halliburton executive and then vice president Dick Cheney, which met with scores of industry representatives in 2001.[36] The task force seized upon the California blackouts to justify more deregulation for fossil fuel companies. Although the crisis stemmed from an insufficiently regulated capitalist marketplace—the company Enron later becoming notorious for market manipulation—and from a lack of investment in renewables, most task force members "placed the blame for America's energy woes squarely on the nation's environmental laws and regulations," recounts EPA head Christine Todd Whitman.[37] Consequently the task force's report recommended expanded fossil fuel production and further deregulation.

Around the same time, Bush officially reneged on a campaign promise to support a cap on carbon dioxide emissions. The promise had perhaps just been a "maneuver to try to outflank Gore on an environmental issue," but the industry was concerned by both the promise and by Bush's appointment of an EPA administrator who supported forcing power plants to cut emissions.[38] Whitman describes how "key Republican members of Congress and energy industry leaders," in collaboration with numerous senior officials within the new administration, mobilized to ensure the promise went unkept:

> The White House staff, in concert with the vice president's office and senior staff from other departments, including the departments of Energy and Commerce, was preparing to recommend such a step [i.e., reversal of Bush's campaign promise], using the need to protect U.S. energy production as justification. Apparently, everyone in those meetings was using the California energy crisis to justify a reversal on the cap. Since half of the nation's energy needs are met by burning coal—the biggest producer of carbon dioxide emissions—they predicted a cap would reduce the availability and raise the cost of coal-generated power, at least in the short term. They saw the situation in California, with its rolling blackouts and frequent brownouts, as just the canary in the coal mine and asserted that the country's energy supply would be seriously disrupted unless the president reversed his position.[39]

The industry's two weapons operated in synergy. One was the capital strike: the threat of disinvestment from the energy sector, which it warned would undermine "U.S. energy production" and "raise the cost" for consumers. The efficacy of that weapon was enhanced by the industry's colonization of the government, which campaign donations had ensured. Advisers financially tied to an industry are unlikely to recommend policy reforms that would lessen society's dependence on that industry.

Bush himself fell in line, reversing his pledge and refraining from reckless rhetoric about addressing the climate crisis. As one observer notes, "In contrast to Clinton and Gore (and to an earlier version of himself), Bush grew increasingly disdainful of climate change. He openly dismissed scientific reports, and allowed White House officials to rewrite agency documents to downplay the risks and emphasize the uncertainties of climate change." He formally repudiated the Kyoto Protocol in "a direct provocation to the international community," presaging Donald Trump's later withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate accord.[40] The early 2000s thus marked a defining moment in Republican rhetoric and policy. In the years that followed, fewer and fewer Republicans would deviate from the genocidal consensus.

Obedience was not yet total, though. The 2008 election of Barack Obama, with a strong voter mandate for climate reform, presented a new threat to the industry. Even a few congressional Republicans were showing insufficient discipline. John McCain's presidential campaign had tried to appeal to voters with vague promises about restricting carbon emissions, and Senator McCain was thought to be entertaining similar notions. Republican Lindsey Graham also evinced some interest in a Senate bill. In the House some Republicans were gesturing similarly. The consensus was in danger of fraying.

No one deserves more credit for cementing that consensus than the secretive oil billionaires Charles and David Koch. As heads of the privately owned Koch Industries, they controlled much of the country's oil refining and distribution network as well as the markets for numerous other consumer products. When the possibility of major climate legislation loomed early in the Obama era, the Kochs deployed their organization Americans for Prosperity in a coordinated war to enforce the genocidal consensus. Between 2007 and 2010 they tripled the Americans for Prosperity budget from $5.7 million to $17.5 million.[41] Koch money funded lobbying, advertising, and campaign donations as well as scholars, think tanks, foundations, and protesters to lend their propaganda legitimacy. It aggressively targeted Republican politicians and candidates who questioned the consensus. Those who strayed were primaried, their districts deluged with Koch money in support of more dependable competitors. Soon hundreds of federal and state politicians signed the Kochs' "carbon pledge" promising to oppose any bill that would force polluters to pay for the carbon they emit. The Koch network also carried out an assault on existing renewable energy mandates in states like Kansas, with considerable success.[42] By 2010 or so, discipline was restored. Republicans were uniformly dedicated to the destruction of society.

Donald Trump was the culmination of this trajectory. His withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate accord signaled his party's explicit abandonment of any interest in mitigating the climate emergency. His environmental appointments reflected that agenda. In 2018 an Associated Press analysis found "that nearly half of the political appointees hired at the

Environmental Protection Agency under Trump have strong industry ties." Many had direct links to the Koch network. Both of his EPA administrators, Scott Pruitt and Andrew Wheeler, had long records as attack dogs for fossil fuel companies. Pruitt had served as Oklahoma's attorney general. Documents obtained by the *New York Times* had earlier revealed a "secretive alliance that Mr. Pruitt and other Republican attorneys general have formed with some of the nation's top energy producers to push back against the Obama regulatory agenda," in which Pruitt and others served essentially as ventriloquist dummies for the industry.[43] Table 1 lists additional examples.

The new appointees were deployed as in a military operation. After the November 2016 election the incoming administration sent first a "landing team" then a "beachhead team" to the EPA, with orders "to get rid of " the agency entirely if possible, according to a key member of the beachhead team.[44] In the end the teams had to settle for more modest accomplishments. In a blitzkrieg assault on environmental protections, they reversed or weakened over one hundred environmental rules, including limits on fossil fuel extraction and on the discharge of greenhouse gases and toxic chemicals. Just a handful of those rollbacks—on fuel economy, methane releases, and hydrofluorocarbons—were projected "to add 1.8 gigatons of CO_2-equivalent to the atmosphere by 2035."[45] The administration took numerous additional actions to prop up fossil fuels, going well beyond the standard government handouts to the industry. It sought to open virtually the entire US coastline to offshore oil drilling, proposed special price subsidies for coal, and even attacked top auto manufacturers when they supported California's regulation of tailpipe emissions.[46] The full impacts of Trump-era destruction will become visible only in the decades and centuries to come, though some results were readily apparent. A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* estimated that the deregulatory frenzy would kill eighty thousand people per decade just in the United States.[47]

Table 1: Trump's environmental appointees

Name	Position in Trump administration	Link(s) to top polluting industries
Rick Perry	Secretary of energy	Board of directors at Energy Transfer Partners (oil)
Dan Brouillette	Secretary of energy	Vice president at United Services Automobile Association Group and Ford Motor Company
Ryan Zinke	Secretary of interior	Senior adviser at Turnberry Solutions (oil and gas)
David Bernhardt	Secretary of interior	Lobbyist at Brownstein, Hyatt et al. (oil, gas, others)
William Perry Pendley	BLM director	Attorney and president at Mountain States Legal Foundation (oil, others)
Scott Angelle	Director, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement	Board of directors at Sunoco Logistics (oil)
Rex Tillerson	Secretary of state	CEO of ExxonMobil
Scott Pruitt	EPA administrator	See text
Andrew Wheeler	EPA administrator	Lobbyist at Faegre Baker Daniels Consulting (coal, others)
David Dunlap	EPA deputy head of science policy	Engineer at Koch Industries (oil, others)
Dennis Lee Forsgren Jr.	EPA deputy assistant administrator for water	Attorney at HBW Resources lobbying firm (oil, gas, others); formerly at ExxonMobil
Patrick Traylor	EPA deputy assistant administrator for enforcement and compliance assurance	Attorney at Hogan Lovells US LLP lobbying firm (coal, oil, steel, others)
Jeffrey Sands	EPA senior agricultural advisor	Lobbyist at Syngenta (pesticides)
Erik Baptist	EPA attorney	Attorney and lobbyist at American Petroleum Institute

Sources: OpenSecrets (https://opensecrets.org); Biesecker, Linderman, and Lardner, "Swamp?"

There is no reason to believe that John Kasich or the other “moderate” Republicans in the 2016 primary would have done things differently than Trump. Nor does the party’s occasional acknowledgement of global warming suggest any change in its policies.[48] There is room within the genocidal consensus for those who admit climate change is real as long as they classify it as a minor problem and oppose doing anything about it. This was Kasich’s position in 2016 and is increasingly the dominant position in the party. In 2022 Senator Rick Scott, chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, released a *Plan to Rescue America* that promises to “take climate change seriously, but not hysterically,” meaning that “we will not adopt nutty policies” like regulating polluters. In a 2022 survey of all fifty Senate Republicans, all fifty denied that the world is “facing a planetary emergency,” and all refused to support “the climate provisions in the Build Back Better Act if they were presented in a stand-alone bill.”[49] All opposed the smaller climate provisions in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

The consolidation of this consensus in the Republican Party was an obvious reason for the failure of climate legislation under both Obama and Biden. By the 2010s the industry could count on rock-solid opposition to major climate reform from all Republicans plus a handful of Democrats with industry ties. And given that the structure of the Senate so heavily favored states that voted Republican, the party’s obstructionism would be very difficult to overcome. Still, control over the Republicans was hardly the fossil fuel industry’s only weapon, as the policies of recent Democratic presidents make clear.

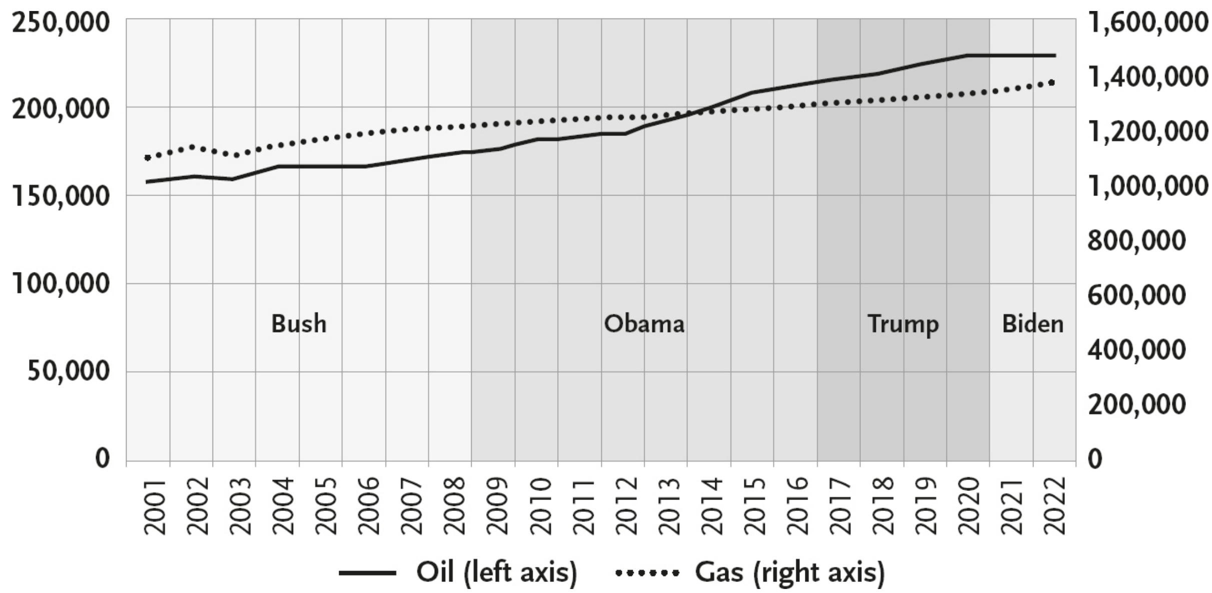
“Big Oil Has Nothing to Complain About”

If Republican control of government signifies the fossil fuel industry’s direct colonization of the state, the same is not true of Democratic control. Campaign donations from dirty energy sectors overwhelmingly favor Republicans and that preference has grown more pronounced over time. In campaign cycles between 2012 and 2020, oil and gas companies gave an average of 87 percent of their donations to Republican candidates, up from 69 percent in the 1990s.[50] Democratic appointees on energy and environmental policy are less likely to be drawn from top polluting industries. Consequently, there is a qualitative difference in policy orientation between the two parties. Whereas Republicans evince a single-minded commitment to maximizing fossil fuel profits, Democrats are more critical of how fossil fuels undermine stability of profits for the broader capitalist world. Most Democrats seek to restrain the parasitism of the fossil fuel companies, balancing that sector's interests with those of the broader ruling class.[51]

This difference is reflected in rhetoric. Most Democrats agree at least rhetorically with the scientific consensus and promise big action. In 1992 Bill Clinton campaigned on "a new covenant for environmental progress" and chose a running mate with an environmentalist reputation. In 2008 Obama pledged that his presidency would be "the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal." In 2020 Biden pledged hundreds of billions in green energy investments, renewable energy mandates for utilities, and "no more drilling on federal lands, period."[52]

However, the gap between rhetoric and policy is vast. Though the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act included major new provisions that will make a big difference in promoting renewable energy, it fell well short of Biden's promises and ecological imperatives. The fiscal scale of the bill was "a pittance compared to what actually needs to be done," acknowledged a Treasury official. The utility mandates and drilling bans were scrapped entirely. Biden in his first year approved more permits for oil and gas extraction on federal territory than Trump had, while mostly overlooking the industry's massive violations of existing law.[53] In 2022 the administration led the world in approvals for oil and gas expansion projects. As the planet reached the highest temperatures in human history, the Biden administration was "forging ahead with new projects that will make it the world's top LNG [liquefied natural gas] exporter for the foreseeable future," *Bloomberg* noted.[54]

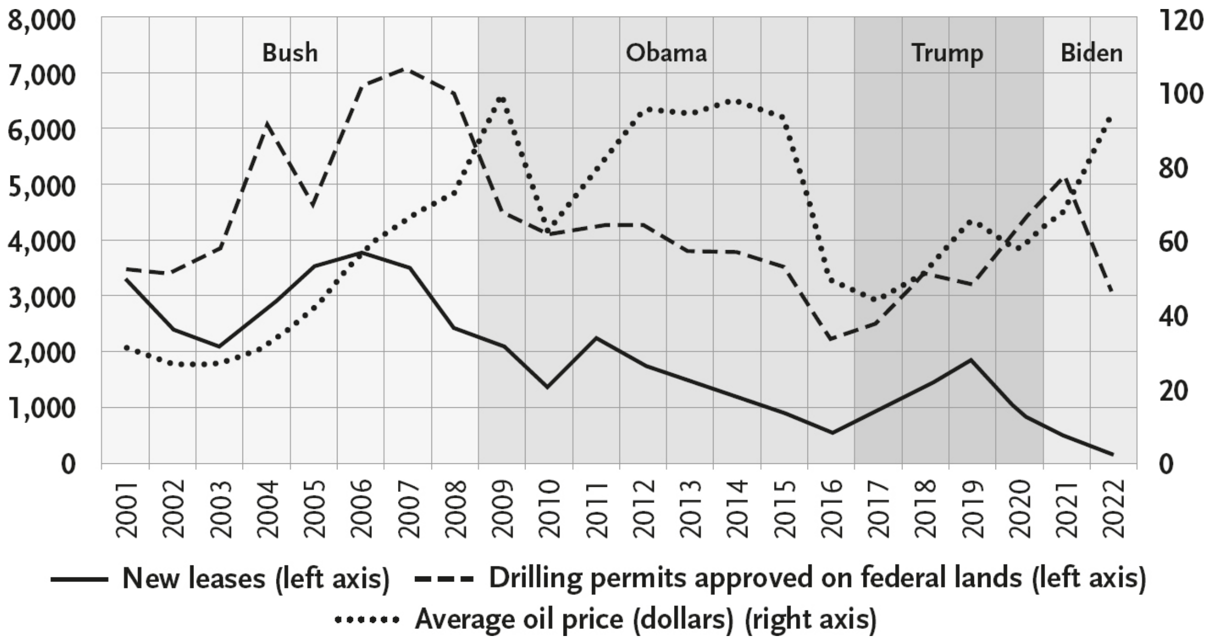
Figure 1: US oil and gas pipelines (miles)



Added pipeline mileage averaged 17,097 miles annually under George W. Bush (2001–09), 14,562 miles under Obama (2009–17), 15,055 miles under Trump (2017–20), and 20,870 miles in the first two years of Biden's administration (2021–22). *Source:* US Department of Transportation; data include "Hazardous Liquid or CO_2 Systems" and "Gas Distribution Main Mileage," accessed July 13, 2023.

Biden was following the pattern of his Democratic predecessors. The 2022 *Financial Times* pronouncement that "Big Oil Has Nothing to Complain about under Joe Biden" would have been an even more fitting verdict for the Clinton and Obama eras.[55] Under Obama, Congress did approve some new funding for renewable energy and the executive branch enacted some regulations that saved lives. But the policies with the potential to deliver rapid and major progress on reducing carbon emissions were defeated. The industry killed a carbon tax proposal under Clinton and various cap-and-trade bills under Obama, and that was after the bills' authors had bent over backward to make the legislation palatable to industry. The impact of these defeats is apparent across a range of indicators like fossil fuel production and pipeline expansion, which do not vary much based on which party holds the White House and Congress (figures 1–3).

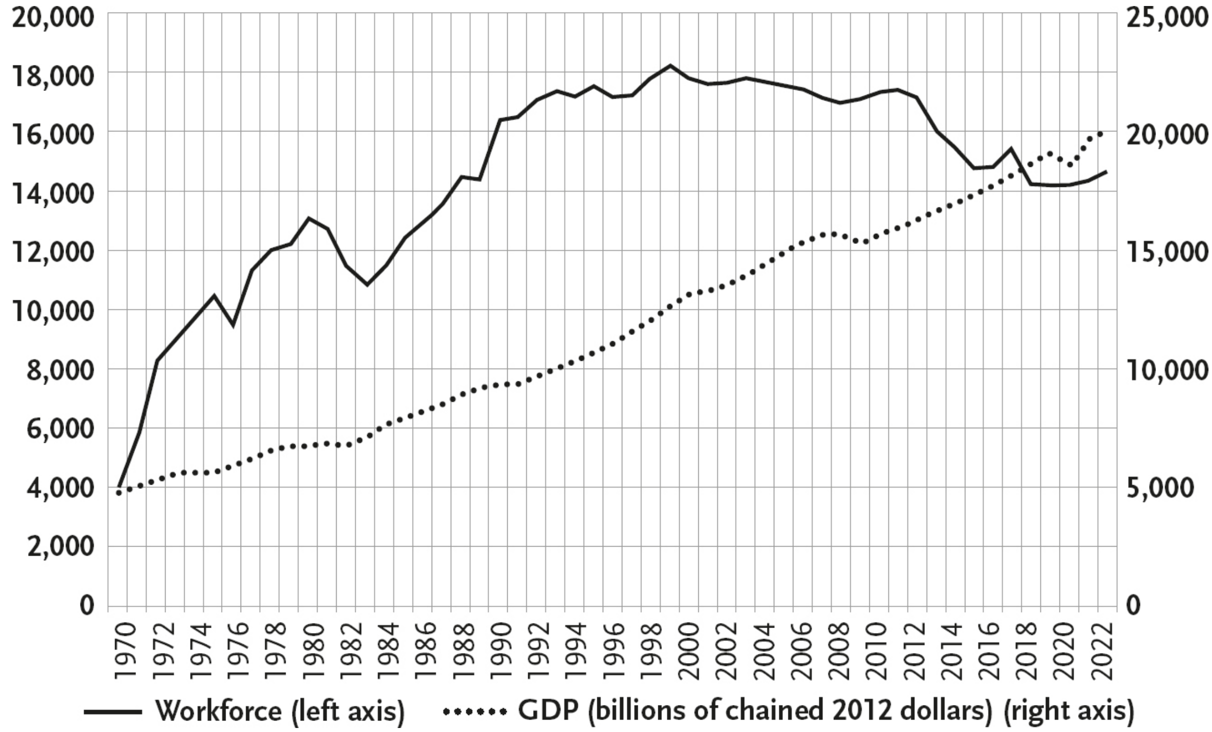
Figure 2: New oil and gas projects on federal lands



Sources: US Bureau of Land Management; US Federal Reserve.

What explains this bipartisan consistency? Part of the answer is obviously the explosion of corporate campaign spending, which accelerated after the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision. By 2022 billionaires were spending "39 times more on federal elections" than they did prior to *Citizens United*.[56] Voter suppression, gerrymandering, and the antidemocratic structure of the US Senate also systematically benefit Republicans and allow them to engage in congressional obstructionism with impunity. The fossil fuel industry has reaped the benefits as much as anyone. The intervention of Republicans and fossil fuel Democrats has often been decisive in defeating reforms. Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema forced drastic compromises in the Build Back Better legislation before tanking it altogether in December 2021. Manchin raised more campaign money in the last quarter of 2021, at the very moment he was delivering the coup de grâce to Build Back Better, than at any point in his career.[57]

Figure 3: The declining EPA workforce



The EPA budget has declined in real terms, contributing to a reduction of the agency's workforce and regulatory capacity. This trend is especially striking given that the economy has grown by over 500 percent since the EPA's creation in 1970. *Sources:* Environmental Protection Agency; US Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Obstruction by Manchin and Republicans also helped stop federal regulators from forcing companies to bear the costs of burning fossil fuels. They successfully pressured the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to abandon a plan to weigh climate impacts in decisions about gas pipelines. They also blocked several of Biden's nominees for top financial regulator positions, who might have taken measures to disincentivize banks from investing in fossil fuels. Biden's nominee for vice chair for supervision at the Federal Reserve, Sarah Bloom Raskin, had voiced some interest in pushing banks to incorporate climate risks into their decisions. As industry publication *American Banker* observed, "her nomination was seen as a chance for the central bank to address the risks that climate change poses to the financial system." In fact, there was considerable support for Raskin's nomination in the financial sector itself. The *Financial Times* endorsed her view on climate risk. But again, the interests of the parasite would triumph over those of the broader ruling class (i.e., "the financial system"). The US Chamber of Commerce lobbied against her, presumably at the behest of the oil company executives who sat on its board of directors. Ultimately Manchin's veto forced Raskin to withdraw from consideration.[58]

Manchin also embodied another mechanism by which capitalists shape policy: politicians' financial stake in the profits of leading firms. In Manchin's case the corruption is unusually flagrant. He is a coal baron who directly profits from an industry that he protects as senator. But at least fifty-one senators or their spouses, especially Republicans but many Democrats as well, have major corporate stock holdings.[59] Even politicians who lack a direct interest in corporate profits are incentivized to support corporations' policy preferences by the expectation of lucrative employment once they leave office. Manchin acknowledged the importance of this motivation in a 2021 meeting with wealthy donors. He was worried that Republican opposition to a Senate commission on the January 2021 coup attempt would provide fodder for the "Far Left" in its campaign to abolish the Senate filibuster, which would deprive business of a key weapon for blocking legislation it dislikes. Manchin urged his donors to pressure Republican senators by using their influence as the senators' potential future employers. He noted that Republican Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri was not seeking reelection in 2022. "If some of you all who might be working with Roy in his next life could tell him" to support the commission, "that'd be nice and it'd help our country."[60] Though ultimately Republicans still blocked the commission, Manchin's appeal suggests the shared elite understanding that prospective employers wield influence over politicians.

The judiciary has also impeded Democratic presidents' climate plans. The fossil fuel industry has devoted enormous resources to colonizing the federal judiciary, with major success in the past two decades. The genocidal majority on the Supreme Court sought to block Obama's Clean Power Plan that would have regulated power plant emissions (albeit weakly).[61] In 2021 a federal judge ruled against Biden's moratorium on federal oil and gas leases. In 2022 the Supreme Court eviscerated the EPA's legal authority to regulate carbon emissions under the Clean Air Act, which the court had endorsed in 2007. The Obama and Biden administrations often cited such rulings to defend themselves against progressive criticisms.

However, the Democrats were not as handcuffed by congressional obstruction and judicial rulings as they claimed. Congress and the courts did not force Obama to approve "enough new oil and gas pipeline to circle the Earth and then some," as he boasted to a business audience in 2012.[62] Obama was not forced to subject environmental protections to "extreme attention" and make "hundreds of technical changes" to the EPA's scientific assessments, as a senior EPA official later described.[63] Biden was not legally compelled to hold "the largest-ever auction of oil and gas drilling leases in the Gulf of Mexico's history" in November 2021. He was not required to continue support for the vast oil drilling initiative in Alaska known as the Willow project, which he did despite a federal judge's August 2021 ruling against it. No one forced his Justice Department to try to derail a citizen lawsuit that sought to establish "a constitutional right to a livable climate." At the global level, Biden did not have to block global measures that would have established an end date for coal use and mandated zero-emission vehicles.[64]

Why, then, have Democratic presidents sought to increase fossil fuel production and infrastructure? The main reason was that fossil fuel corporations controlled most of the nation's energy supply and constantly threatened to raise prices, lay off workers, and deprive government of tax revenues if they didn't get what they wanted. They simultaneously blocked government from accelerating the growth of the renewables sector, which could reduce society's dependence on fossil fuels. Faced with these constraints, Democrats usually supported the industry.

Clinton's 1993 proposal for a modest tax on carbon emissions is an instructive case. The fossil fuel industry promised to pass along the costs to households and businesses that purchased energy, and "as the cost was passed along, it would hit businesses along the line, resulting in a heavy impact on the economy generally." This threat helped mobilize other business sectors. The Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Manufacturers, and National Federation of Independent Business all joined in, predicting that business investment would plummet and 400,000 to

600,000 jobs would be lost. The chamber said the tax would "stifle incentives to save and invest, further retard economic growth, and have an inflationary impact throughout the economy." These threats were not reflective of any inevitable reaction by investors. An independent study estimated that the tax's impacts on inflation and growth would be minimal: it "would have added 0.1 to 0.2 percent to the annual inflation rate and would have reduced real growth in gross domestic product 0.1 percent annually through 1998."[65] Any major disinvestment would be a political decision designed to punish politicians. The opponents' economic argument held no water, but the polluters might still engage in a political disinvestment, and the Democrats would be blamed for any fallout. Clinton agreed to drop the idea even though it had already passed the House.

The same playbook was deployed during the Obama era to thwart climate legislation and to compel executive branch support for fossil fuel production. The Koch brothers had Republicans moving in lockstep, but controlling the Democrats required other measures. After the Senate climate bills were defeated in 2010, Al Gore lamented that the industry was "able to use the fear of the economic downturn" to kill reform. Again, a downturn was not likely and was certainly not an automatic result of environmental protections. But the industry's threat of a capital strike—especially in the aftermath of a historic recession—was sufficiently credible to help crush the bills. As one journalist reported, "The notion that fixing the climate necessarily means destroying the economy was to become the Big Lie of the climate debate and the signature achievement of the opponents of action." The specter of a capital strike and resulting "downturn" worked in conjunction with the industry's other weapons, including litigation and obstruction by its conduits in Congress. The latter helped ensure that the bills were either crushed or sufficiently watered down to allow the industry to maintain its profit margins. "The last thing we wanted to do was be responsible for shutting down US industry," said one of the key staffers working on the major House climate bill. Thus fossil-friendly House Democrats like Rick Boucher of Virginia "had a captive audience." Boucher and the conduits for other carbon-intensive industries, including John

Dingell (auto) and Mike Doyle (steel), ensured the weakening of the House bill before the Senate killed the effort entirely.[66]

The Biden administration renewed its support for oil and gas leases on federal lands for similar reasons. In response to Biden's January 2021 pause on new leases, the industry threatened that an extended pause "would curtail domestic energy supplies, harming US national security interests while depriving federal coffers of revenue tied to the activity." It mobilized its representatives in fossil-fuel producing states to amplify these threats. The Republican governor of Wyoming, Mark Gordon, warned that the pause would "send capital elsewhere" and reduce the state's tax revenues, meaning less "school funding" and less "ability to meet healthcare needs."[67] Significant inflation in the US economy in 2021 and 2022, including a spike in gasoline prices following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, gave fossil fuel companies more ammunition in their demands for government support. Biden responded by begging the companies to increase their domestic drilling. The industry leveraged the supply crisis to demand a better "policy environment." More government largesse would not end the inflation because government policy was not impeding drilling. As noted above, only a small portion of all drilling occurs on federal land, and the lack of faster drilling was primarily due to investors' preference for higher dividends and debt repayments over new drilling. But largesse *would* enhance industry profits.[68] At the same time they were issuing these threats, industry leaders commanded their political representatives to block the major investments in renewables that would reduce society's dependence on fossil fuels. They also enlisted leftover Trump appointees in government agencies like the US Postal Service and Tennessee Valley Authority to maximize the use of fossil fuels within their domains and to amplify industry threats of disinvestment. James Danly, a Trump appointee at FERC, threatened that regulators' consideration of climate impacts was "going to chill investment" in fossil fuel infrastructure.[69]

The strategy worked. Biden went to court to defend the Willow project and continued to support it even after a federal judge ruled against it. He defended 440 leases that Trump had granted in Wyoming. All told, in its first six months the administration granted permits for oil and gas drilling at the fastest pace since 2008. In early 2022 it announced a program for new leasing on federal territories, officially breaking Biden's campaign pledge of "no more drilling on federal lands, period." The Democratic commissioners at FERC backed off their plan after they were warned about chilling investments.[70] Ironically it was Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the first Indigenous cabinet member and a longtime critic of the industry, who reluctantly signed off on these actions—an indication of how much power the industry wields even when its own people are not in control of the executive branch.

The result of the fossil fuel industry's stranglehold is that Democratic administrations have pursued a mix of policies accurately characterized as "schizophrenic" by both polluters and environmentalists. The thrust of Obama's and Biden's policies has been to maximize fossil fuel production while also investing in renewable energy and conservation to reduce demand for fossil fuels. This approach was captured in Obama's "all-of-the-above energy strategy" and the Biden administration's vow to "walk and chew gum at the same time."[71] Yet the industry's success in limiting new spending on renewables has meant that Democratic politicians have done far less gum-chewing than walking, in this case toward the precipice.

"The Costs of Staying the Course Are Not Obvious"

What is puzzling about this status quo is not that it harms the vast majority of humanity—capitalism has always done that—but that it harms most of the ruling class. Climate destruction is projected to cost the world economy tens of trillions of dollars according to the financial industry's own estimates.[72] Elites will be able to shift many, but not all, of those costs onto workers. They too will pay in the form of higher costs for real estate, insurance, loans, and other inputs throughout their supply chains. Some sectors such as agriculture face direct threats to their production and sales. Many others will face less certain markets for their products. In addition, capitalists face what financial analysts call "transition risks": as the global transition to noncarbon energy accelerates, and as more governments adopt proclimate measures (even if weak ones), the enormous capital investments sunk into fossil fuel extraction, infrastructure, and combustion are at risk of being "stranded."[73]

Many capitalists are quite aware of the problem. In 2020 the World Economic Forum's annual survey of business and political elites found that, for the first time, the "top five global risks" perceived by the respondents were all environmental: "extreme weather," then "climate action failure," "natural disasters," "biodiversity loss," and "human-made environmental disasters." In a 2022 poll of two-thousand global business executives, two-thirds reported their companies were "very concerned" about the climate crisis and 79 percent said the world has reached "a climate change tipping point," up from 59 percent just a year before. Ninety-seven percent said their companies had "already felt negative impacts of climate change." In the financial industry, bank risk officers and insurance companies both see climate change as their biggest problem.[74]

State elites also have reasons to oppose fossil fuels. The industry's stranglehold on the economy confers power on unreliable oil-producing states, threatens to unleash massive refugee flows, and otherwise jeopardizes the stability upon which US global hegemony depends. Though state elites relish a certain degree of instability (how else to justify enormous budgets for their respective agencies?), at a certain point it can undermine their institutional health. Diplomats and Pentagon leaders have thus expressed concern about the "global exoduses prompted by rising temperatures" and about the strain that climate chaos will place on military capacity, including overseas bases and access to resources.[75] Other state elites have expressed alarm about China's growing dominance in the renewables sector, calling for "accelerating the energy transition" to counter China. Their support for Biden's Inflation Reduction Act was largely driven by a desire "to enhance American competitiveness in the face of Chinese challenges," as diplomats and Pentagon officials acknowledge.[76] In addition, fear that the United States' position as a global free rider could trigger retaliation against US businesses has also produced some movement by state elites and polluting industries themselves, as in the case of fossil fuel companies supporting regulations on methane emissions. These expressions of elite concern have led some progressive analysts to see the

Defense and State departments as potential allies in the fight against polluters.[77]

Yet concrete action against polluters has been lacking. Banks are willing to fund renewables but have also poured trillions into dirty energy projects since the 2015 Paris climate accord. Asset management firms with "net zero" commitments continue to invest hundreds of billions in fossil fuel companies that are expanding production. Other industries issue vague and misleading net-zero pledges while making only minor tweaks to their business operations and lobbying positions. Many want more public investment in renewables but insist that workers foot the bill, which explains why many opposed Biden's Build Back Better. The Pentagon and other state elites warn about climate disruption but have not lobbied aggressively against the fossil fuel industry. Consequently, fossil fuel executives do not seem concerned about the prospect of stranded assets. Candid investors say they "remain very bullish" on the prospects for "more growth from oil and gas."[78]

There are good reasons to remain bullish. Profits in the fossil fuel industry remain high, particularly with Putin's invasion of Ukraine and inflation windfalls. Financial industry reports are somewhat contradictory, reflecting the ambiguity clouding the investment environment. There are still some hopeful forecasts telling banks and insurers that climate breakdown won't be so bad for business, or even that they'll benefit by being able to charge clients more. Few governments have taken aggressive measures that could imperil fossil fuel profits in the near future, meaning "transition risk" is still low. As *American Banker* describes the logic of the bullish investor, "Energy will inevitably transition to more renewable sources, but that process will take decades."[79] Most investors are betting that fossil fuels will continue to be burned long into the future. One typical analyst, a partner in a private equity firm, predicts that electric vehicles might not overtake gasoline "for twenty years" and says it remains "an amazing time to invest in oil and gas."[80] As for the "death and destruction" forecasted by analysts in the financial industry, it won't affect big investors personally. As one elite interview subject in Australia explained it, "In a country like Australia where we are not starving to death, we're not going to run out of water.… You know, we've got enough resources to manage that. We can have air conditioning and all the rest of it."[81] Such is the genocidal candor inside the executive suites.

They are justified in thinking they can force others to bear the costs. Historically that is the dominant pattern in times of crisis, and they are politically mobilized to make sure it holds true today. Banks are confident they will be bailed out by taxpayers.[82] Agribusiness knows the Department of Agriculture will compensate them, with taxpayers covering most of the bill, whenever "yields or revenues decline" due to extreme weather. As California wildfires get worse, the insurance industry hopes to prevent legislative or regulatory changes that would force them to offer coverage to homeowners in high-risk areas. Meanwhile, the cost of fighting the wildfires is largely funded through charges to utility customers.[83]

The capitalist class as a whole seems optimistic about measures that would obviate the need to confront the fossil fuel industry. Carbon capture and storage, hydrogen fuel, and stratospheric aerosol injection top the list. Carbon capture and storage and hydrogen are nowhere close to being viable on the scale needed, most hydrogen production is itself fossil fuel intensive, and injecting chemicals into the sky is extremely risky. But the idea of "a savior in the wings"—a low-cost resolution to the climate emergency—is appealing in the air-conditioned suites.[84] If fossil fuel executives conceive of such schemes as "a license to continue to operate," for nonfossil businesses they are a license to avoid confronting their fossil fuel brethren.[85]

This logic is especially appealing when confronting the industry appears to carry short-term costs, the product of two centuries of carbon lock-in. Businesses across the economy have vast investments in machinery, vehicles, and heating and cooling systems that run on fossil fuels and would need replacing. They rely on a steady supply of cheap fuel. The prices they pay for electricity are also dependent on fossil fuels unless power plants have converted to renewables. The fossil fuel and electric industries never miss a chance to remind their fellow capitalists of this dependence. When other industries show signs of turning against them, more direct coercion may be applied. "The fossil fuel industry has its claws into the Republican Party in Congress so deeply that other trade associations fear repercussions" if they are disloyal, a sentiment that one senator reports having "heard repeatedly from companies and trade associations." Following a 2021 Texas law blacklisting financial firms that divest from fossil fuels, the asset manager BlackRock promised Texas "[We] will not boycott energy companies" and "We want to see these companies succeed and prosper."[86]

Elites' perceptions of the risks, costs, and benefits associated with the green transition are also dependent on their direct material stakes in the fossil fuel industry. Companies and individuals with direct ties to fossil fuels are more likely to ignore the dire assessments of their own risk analysts. Research has identified several key factors, including lending relationships, stock ownership, and interlocking boards of directors. Financial institutions that have lent large amounts to polluters naturally want their clients to be profitable. Diverse financial and nonfinancial corporations also own stock in fossil fuel companies, either directly or indirectly. Many directors of top corporations sit on multiple boards across the energy and nonenergy sectors. These relationships influence how elite actors interpret complex economic situations. The importance of these ties can outweigh other risks, such as insurers losing money on claims due to extreme weather. Thus even when risk assessments tell them to be wary of fossil fuels, they may choose to listen to the more optimistic voices.[87]

In sum, the ruling class currently has more reasons to stick with fossil fuels than to abandon them. The capitalists who favor the phaseout of fossil fuels are either insufficiently committed to taking real action or are too weak to enforce their will on the others. One CEO from the media industry, writing in the *Financial Times*, aptly assesses the thinking of her colleagues: "The costs of staying on the same course are not obvious," while "it is easier to see the costs" of abandoning fossil fuels.[88] So how can we make the costs of fossil fuels more obvious to them?

Dan Eberhart quoted in David R. Baker and Ari Natter, "Biden's Early Climate Blitz Goes Faster, Further Than Expected," *Bloomberg News* online, January 28, 2021.

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CHAPTER TWO

"The Risk Is Us"

How Movements Have Begun to Turn the Tide

THE ATLANTIC COAST PIPELINE SHOULD'VE BEEN EASY. IN 2014 TWO ENERGY BEHEMOTHS, Dominion Energy and Duke Energy, proposed to build the six-hundred-mile natural gas pipeline through West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina. These states were hardly known as bastions of environmentalist sentiment. As always, the industry won support by promising the pipeline would "promote stable energy prices and economic development." It also had support from leaders of both parties. The Obama administration had approved Dominion's plan to export gas through Maryland, and Obama's Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) gave every indication that it would rubber-stamp the Atlantic Coast project. In 2017 Trump took over and vocally championed the pipeline. In 2020 the Supreme Court added its blessing.[1]

Yet the industry was defeated. It met particular resistance in North Carolina. Black communities with a long history of fighting environmental injustice mobilized against the racist decision to locate the pipeline in majority-nonwhite areas. Indigenous tribes demanded that FERC block the project due to the local environmental impacts and the disrespect for their sacred sites. Environmental groups filed multiple lawsuits over potential water contamination and harm to endangered species. Some landowners resisted the companies' efforts to use eminent domain against them.[2] As a result the project dragged on and costs ballooned, from the $5.1 billion price tag projected in 2015 to $8 billion by early 2020. Citing "ongoing delays and increasing cost uncertainty which threaten the economic viability of the project," the companies finally cancelled the pipeline in July 2020. US Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette, who was serving in the Trump administration in between careers as an auto and natural gas executive, fumed that "the obstructionist environmental lobby has successfully killed the Atlantic Coast Pipeline."[3]

The obstructionists killed it by increasing the financial risk attached to the project. As this chapter argues, there are several ways to do that. Increasing legal risk is one way. Persistent lawsuits are an expensive headache for the industry, and if even one major court decision goes in the movement's favor it can enhance the "litigation risk" to the point that a project becomes "too uncertain to justify investing more shareholder capital," a key factor in Dominion and Duke's decision. Uncertainty over outstanding permit applications and "the potential for additional incremental delays associated with continued legal challenges" based on improper regulatory procedure convinced the companies "that committing millions of dollars of additional investment for tree-felling and subsequent ramp up for full construction is no longer a prudent use of shareholder capital."[4] The fact that fossil fuel companies must typically secure multiple permits at several levels of government gives the movement multiple chokepoints. Though not central in this case, additional movement strategies that have enhanced risk include on-site protests and occasional vandalism that force companies to fund repression and surveillance, pressuring financiers and insurers to deny companies the financial resources they need, and pressuring politicians to take actions that hinder projects.[5]

The Atlantic Coast showdown was just one skirmish in the war against fossil fuels, but such victories can produce cascading impacts on the industry as a whole. Dominion and Duke complained that their cancellation decision reflected "the increasing legal uncertainty" overhanging fossil fuel infrastructure projects. *Bloomberg News*, which usually speaks for finance capital, called the cancellation and a host of other setbacks in July 2020 (discussed below) "a deluge of bad news for an industry that's increasingly finding that the mega-projects of the past are no longer feasible in the face of unprecedented opposition to fossil fuels and the infrastructure that supports them." A year later the *Financial Times* noted that "a surge of protests and legal objections by environmental campaigners, Native American tribes, and community groups" was producing "budget-busting delays" in pipeline projects, and that projects were "being abandoned as costs increase[d]." The report concluded that "new mega-pipeline projects … might well be a thing of the past."[6]

This chapter draws lessons from these recent victories, taking a bird'seye view to identify some of the common patterns. I examine how victories like the defeat of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline have sometimes been possible. This and other cases highlight the importance of the "social movements and lawyers" approach taken by the left wing of the climate and Indigenous movements.[7] By combining disruptive protest campaigns with litigation against fossil fuel projects, organizers have exploited tensions between different sectors of capitalists and between state elites and fossil fuel companies. I argue that these are more than just bright spots amid an otherwise bleak landscape: they illuminate a pathway through which ordinary people can confront the fossil fuel industry and contribute to its ultimate abolition. These campaigns are already helping to tip the scales against fossil fuels by forcing defections from other parts of the ruling class. That process is happening much too slowly, but it might soon reach a tipping point where investors collectively desert the industry and rapid decarbonization becomes politically possible.

The key word is *might*. The fossil fuel industry is vulnerable, but its future depends on many variables. Absent a growing and disruptive mass movement, most of the ruling class will be content to muddle along a while longer, slowly decarbonizing as millions of humans and other living things are fried to death. The movement can alter the equation by increasing the financial risk associated with fossil fuels. As one recent study notes, "While finance may be unlikely to become a vocal ally for evidence-based climate policy, it is possible to shift the risk landscape such that it favors a reconfiguration" within the ruling class. In that scenario other elite sectors would decide "to exclude fossil capital, politically isolating and subjecting it to severe curtailments by heavily regulating emissions down a pathway to phasing out the sector completely."[8] Many organizers are operating with that goal in mind. In 2018 the Canadian government of Justin Trudeau bought the Trans Mountain tar sands pipeline from private company Kinder Morgan, which had grown wary of the furious opposition to the project. The Canadian government "purchased the pipeline to de-risk it," says Secwépemc organizer Kanahus Manuel, who has helped organize blockades and divestment efforts against the project. "The risk is us."[9]

"Cutting with Both Arms of the Scissors"

To the extent that governments have taken any meaningful action on the climate crisis, their reforms have been mostly geared toward increasing the supply of renewable energy and the demand for it. Policies have included subsidies for research and development, tax credits for consumers, "feed-in tariffs" for independent producers of solar and wind energy, and renewable energy standards for utilities. To a more limited extent, governments have also taken measures to directly reduce the market demand for fossil fuels. Those measures have included carbon pricing policies, emission standards, bans on certain products, and cancellation or closure of coal-fired power plants. The climate movement has helped win these policies.

As important as these policies are, they are inadequate. Simply boosting renewables will not displace fossil fuels quickly enough. Adding alternative energy sources to the grid does not automatically reduce demand for fossil fuels. One global study finds that, over a fifty-year time frame, "each unit of electricity generated by non-fossil-fuel sources displaced less than one-tenth of a unit of fossil-fuel-generated electricity."[10] Even reducing the demand for fossil fuels, while critical, is insufficient. Cutting demand for carbon in one jurisdiction lowers prices, which can lead consumers elsewhere to buy more of it. Furthermore, abundant fossil fuel supplies and the existence of vast carbon infrastructure in the form of pipelines, power plants, and combustion engines provides incentive to keep burning fossil fuels.[11] We therefore need policies that raise the costs of extracting, transporting, and burning carbon. Those policies would reduce fossil fuel supplies at the same time that other policies reduce demand—thus "cutting with both arms of the scissors," as scholars Fergus Green and Richard Denniss argue.[12] Some of the movement's most important recent victories have involved placing constraints on the supply of fossil fuels. Activists have won bans on certain types of extraction (e.g., fracking) in particular jurisdictions, cancellation of pipelines and certain extraction projects, tighter regulation that makes extraction more costly, and commitments by financial institutions and large investors to limit or phase out their support for fossil fuels.[13]

Some experts still downplay the supply-side approach. The divestment movement elicits special skepticism: it's purely symbolic and perhaps even counterproductive, they insist. Before looking at recent movement victories, it's worth briefly assessing the critics' arguments. One such argument is that activists will never have a material impact on fossil fuel producers or carbon emission levels by targeting supply. We're told that obstructing production in the United States or Canada just leads to more oil being produced elsewhere, and without the minimal environmental safeguards employed at wells in the West. Similarly, obstructing pipeline construction just leads to more oil being transported by rail. Divestment is equally ineffective since divested shares in fossil fuel companies are simply bought up by other investors. And even if we get big banks to cut ties with fossil fuels, other entities such as private equity firms will step in to fill the void, and they are even less transparent than the banks.[14]

There is partial truth in these objections. Shutting down a well or pipeline in the United States cannot stop Saudi Arabia or Russia from harvesting more oil. That's why cutting demand for oil is also essential, since only plummeting global demand will ensure that their oil remains in the ground. This does not mean that cutting supply is futile, however. Blocking production in one place can, in fact, reduce global production levels. Reduced production in one country is not automatically replaced by increased output in others. One study in the journal *Climatic Change* estimates that ending new coal and oil leases in US federal territories would cut global CO_2 emissions by 279 million tons a year by 2030 even after accounting for increased production elsewhere and substitution by other fossil fuels. The study refutes the fallacy of "perfect substitution" that many analysts wrongly assume to be a law of economics.[15] Moreover, there is a political benefit to reducing production in the United States. Because the

US fossil fuel industry is the main obstacle to the US government confronting the climate emergency, a weakening of US companies will open political space for major policy reforms to wind down supply and demand simultaneously.

The objection that stopping a pipeline won't stop the oil or gas from being burned is also dubious. A lack of pipelines makes the fuel costlier to transport, which disincentivizes both producers and buyers. And if producers are forced into the costlier shipping option they will have less money available for production. As one oil investment consultant notes, "If drillers are forced to pay higher prices to transport that crude, they will have less capital to spend on drilling for oil."[16] That's why the oil and gas industry is so aggressive in its efforts to build pipelines: if they can't build them, the drilling itself often doesn't happen.[17] In short, we should be wary of the typical arguments about why it's futile to limit supply or transport infrastructure in one jurisdiction. "The argument that someone else is going to do it" is "just an excuse" to avoid action, argues Christa Clapp, a lead author of the finance section in the IPCC's *Sixth Assessment Report*.[18]

Is divestment effective? The movement has certainly had a qualitative effect on many investors and governments. Clapp argues that divestment campaigns have had "an invaluable impact on raising awareness." Negative attention to carbon investments, and positive attention to green ones, has also had an important "signaling effect" in many companies and investor circles, which has sometimes led to nontrivial changes in investment practices.[19] As for quantitative impacts of divestment, many analysts are skeptical. They point out that if divestment merely entails asset owners selling off their shares in fossil fuel companies, then other investors will buy them and the stock price will not suffer. So is divestment just a "symbolic action"?[20]

The skeptics are too quick to dismiss the material potential of divestment. Though the material impacts of divestment campaigns are still a matter of debate, there are some encouraging signs. Some research finds that divestment does in fact reduce share prices in fossil fuel corporations. More important than the observable impacts so far, however, is the prospect of a future tipping point: once divestment passes a certain threshold, we could see a sudden plunge in stock prices.[21]

Moreover, stock prices are not the only relevant indicator. The capital for extraction comes not just from shareholders and internal cash flow but also from loans, bonds, and underwriting as well. Between 2016 and 2022 banks provided $5.5 trillion in financing for fossil fuel companies, including over $1.5 trillion to companies that were expanding their drilling operations.[22] For this reason divestment organizers have increasingly looked beyond university or church endowments to also target banks, insurers, asset managers like BlackRock, and large asset owners such as state pension funds—the "financial accomplices" of climate destruction, in the words of the UN secretary general.[23] Since a significant portion of the industry's funding comes from large banks, they wield more power than most individual asset owners and are thus vital targets for divestment campaigns. If the banks stop making loans and withdraw their other investments from the industry, accessing capital becomes costlier and more difficult. Curtailing bank financing for the industry probably "has more of an effect on future emissions than selling stock," as many business analysts and activists argue.[24] It's true that private equity firms may step in to replace the banks, but private equity expects higher rates of return, which means that cutting off the industry's access to banks can be financially consequential.[25] The defection of insurance companies is especially threatening since the industry is more concentrated than finance and there are fewer alternatives available if top insurers start refusing to underwrite. I return to this point below.

Recent developments suggest the threat that divestment poses. The most systematic study of divestment's impact on the industry was published in 2021. Based on a thirty-three-country survey, it found that divestment commitments did, in fact, significantly hinder oil and gas companies' ability to access financing.[26] Divestment campaigns may be most threatening, however, when they go beyond stock divestment to also boycott the banks, insurers, and other financial actors that enable carbon pollution. The fossil fuel industry's aggressive reaction certainly suggests that it feels threatened. In addition to waging an intensive propaganda campaign against divestment, the industry has recently lobbied its political representatives to punish banks and other financial institutions that adopt environmental restrictions.[27] Although Wall Street continues to pump money into the sector, there is clear worry about the tide shifting. In 2023 *Pipeline & Gas Journal* reported, “Oil companies are struggling to secure financing in the midst of climate change as titans like J.P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs come under increasing pressure [to] prove the sustainability of their investments.”[28] In short, those who see divestment as purely symbolic underestimate the potential quantitative impacts.

Another argument against divestment is that it forfeits an opportunity to change the fossil fuel industry from within—what’s called “engagement” in investor lingo. But industry executives do not make decisions in response to well-reasoned arguments. No engagement with a polluter carries any force unless there is a realistic prospect of exit. An engager must be willing to leave the company if the company proves intransigent. As financial economist Ayako Yasuda points out, “The threat is needed to have the active engagement actually be effective,” so “both have a role to play.” This opinion appears to be gaining ground in the financial press, even as many universities, pension funds, and financiers still wave the engagement flag to justify their current investment policies.[29]

Recent academic studies have vindicated activists’ efforts to restrict fossil fuel production using these tactics. Researchers note that restricting supply has some unique benefits, which in turn make emission reductions more achievable and sustainable. One economic advantage is that monitoring for compliance is much easier (and cheaper) than with demand-side policies because there are far fewer producers than consumers. Another is that supply restrictions counteract the tendency of investors to ignore the full costs and risks of continued production once the “sunk costs” of constructing expensive carbon infrastructure are out of the way. When popular resistance leads governments and fossil fuel companies to restrict or cancel new projects, it “send[s] a clear signal to investors” that such projects may get even riskier in the future.[30]

Targeting fossil fuel production also has political advantages, both for organizers and for reform-oriented governments. Demand-side measures like carbon taxes at the point of consumption are poorly understood by the public, even by many on the Left. Though governments can financially compensate consumers for higher prices, the workings of carbon pricing are confusing to most people. Targeting the producers directly centers public attention on the enemy itself and often carries more tangible payoffs. Direct taxes on polluters are easier to understand and garner more support in polls.[31] In addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, restricting production and infrastructure also yields localized benefits by protecting the water, air, and soil on which farms and communities depend, with visible health, social, and economic impacts. It therefore "facilitates alliance-building among diverse groups with wide-ranging concerns about fossil fuels."[32] Strong and diverse alliances make reform more possible and more durable.

Divestment campaigns are usually not directed at particular fossil fuel projects, but they likewise focus attention on specific targets that are visible and accessible (and vulnerable to disruption) at the local level. Bank branches, insurance offices, and campus board of trustees meetings are more convenient targets than the White House or state capitol buildings. Campaigns with local targets facilitate participation by larger numbers of people and allow for easier escalation as compared with occasional marches in Washington. As Anishinaabe lawyer and organizer Tara Houska says, they are "a way for people to get involved from anywhere."[33]

Research on activist mobilization indeed finds that directly confronting the polluters and their financial enablers is a better way to build the movement. Having a clear enemy helps rally people. One recent field experiment evaluated how potential recruits responded to different climate messaging. It found "consistent evidence that framing those messages in negative terms (e.g., stop dirty energy) is more effective than framing them positively (e.g., promote clean energy)," which belies the liberal mantra that activists should always keep it positive.[34] Campaigns against particular pipelines, power plants, and extraction projects, as well as divestment campaigns targeting the financial sector's connections to fossil fuels, serve longer-term purposes as well. They raise the visibility of energy policy decisions that are usually hidden from public scrutiny, thereby helping to raise awareness of the problem, the culprits responsible, and the need to phase out fossil fuels in general. In so doing they help build momentum for government action. Large-scale bans at the governmental level "are likely to originate in locally-oriented campaigns," which build pressure for action at higher levels.[35]

The personal impacts on participants are important as well. Anti-fossil-fuel campaigns offer a chance for people to develop organizing skills that they can use in future battles. Going head-to-head with capitalists also leads many participants to develop a deeper anticapitalist consciousness.[36] One of the reasons divestment campaigns are scary to elites is that they challenge the idea that profit should be the primary operating principle in an economy. Divestment campaigns also question, at least implicitly, the right of the anointed few to rule the economy. Executives, investors, and their financial advisers are justifiably concerned that a divestment campaign may lead to a broader attack on their right to make decisions for everyone else. "Let's leave financial decisions to the experts," oil companies lecture us.[37]

None of this is to suggest that politicians are unimportant or that targeting them is never a worthwhile strategy. We need politicians to support climate reforms that cut fossil fuel supply and demand. We also need them to refrain from unleashing repression against us when we block pipelines or push banks to divest. But dedicating ourselves to electoral and legislative politics is not the best way to influence what politicians do. The strategic question here is less *what needs to be done*—we need lots of things to be done, by all the political and economic elites who govern our society—than how *we* can most effectively pressure those elites. As Errico Malatesta pointed out in 1924, "Since no one can do everything in this world, one must choose one's own line of conduct."[38] We must decide what uses of our limited energy are most efficacious.

Some analysts fail to make this distinction. One leading progressive intellectual appeals "to sensible and patriotic policymakers" to recognize their own self-interest in aggressive decarbonization and to use their cultural authority to rally the public around dramatic action. Such appeals are understandable. It's possible, as he argues, that "intelligent realists" within the Pentagon could convince the military leadership to "throw its full weight behind the Green New Deal."[39] It's possible that intelligent realists within the corporate elite may decide it's in their self-interest to do the same. That would be great. But if history and recent events are any guide, even the most intelligent elites are unlikely to confront parasitic industries on their own initiative, at least before it's too late.

Meanwhile, what can the rest of us do? Unless we're wealthy and well-connected, we have no power to influence those elites through reasoned appeals to their self-interest or morality. The key question should be, which variables in a complex world are most within our power to control? State and corporate elites might someday pursue rapid decarbonization, perhaps influenced by "intelligent realist" appeals. In the meantime, the best way for us to shift their thinking is by mounting a mass movement that threatens continued disruption to their interests through our action where we work, live, and consume. Disruption will give them added reason to heed the intelligent realists. This is the dynamic that eventually led Pentagon leaders to arguably their biggest about-face in history, when they suddenly decided to support withdrawal from Vietnam, and which has led capitalists to shift positions on workers' rights, racial segregation, and much else.[40]

The (Real) War on Coal

Something similar has been happening with the coal industry since the 2000s. There has long been a good economic argument for why investors, utilities, and governments should abandon coal: it's more expensive to mine and transport than other energy sources, including other fossil fuels, and as the dirtiest of the fossil fuels there is particular risk of coal assets being "stranded" as the world energy transition proceeds.[41] But economic elites are not automatons responding blindly to market signals. Their judgments about how they can maximize their gains are informed by political, social, and cultural criteria and involve speculation about many future unknowns. Chief among the unknowns in this case is the speed and vigor with which other portions of the elite, including capitalists and state officials (regulators, judges, and politicians), will take action prejudicial to the coal industry. Fast and aggressive action would increase the risk associated with a continued bet on coal, but slow action might allow coal to remain a decent bet for a while longer. In this murky context, anticoal movements have been a vital factor. Through their impacts on economic and political elites, those movements have enhanced the financial risk of continued coal investments.

Collective action against coal's environmental destruction goes back many decades. Mine workers have protested black lung disease, while communities located near mines, usually led by working-class women, have often protested the coal dust, water pollution, and other localized impacts of the industry. Militant labor and community resistance in Appalachia in the 1960s and 1970s, including strikes, vandalism, and other tactics, led to important protective legislation at the state and federal levels.[42] This history is erased by right-wing politicians and pundits who depict coal communities as staunch allies of the industry.

In the early 2000s anticoal organizing began drawing more attention to the industry's greenhouse gas emissions alongside its local impacts. In 2004 the Sierra Club, the Rainforest Action Network (RAN), and others established a "Beyond Coal" coalition that opposed all new coal-fired power plants in the United States. By 2009 there were over 250 US groups organizing against coal mines and plants in a highly decentralized attack that some organizers likened to a "swarm."[43] They included Indigenous tribes and organizations, groups of local landowners and residents, and others harmed by the local impacts of mining and burning coal. Many of those activists were also worried about the impact on the heating of the atmosphere, which RAN and some other climate groups explicitly highlighted. The big environmental organizations that spent most of their time in Washington, like the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council, were notably absent.[44]

The accomplishments of the anticoal campaigners are stunning. The Bush administration's plans for a massive buildout of new coal-fired plants were mostly thwarted, and no coal-friendly politicians since then, including Trump, have had any more luck resuscitating the industry. By 2023 the movement had blocked well over a hundred coal-fired power plants from being built in the United States and had successfully retired 742 existing plants, 63 percent of the US total. Globally, 76 percent of plans for new coal-fired plants between 2016 and 2021 were cancelled.[45] These victories blocked the expansion of demand for coal and, by shuttering many plants already in operation, substantially reduced the existing demand. In terms of direct impact on greenhouse gas emissions, these wins were the most significant achievements of the early twenty-first century.

Of course, market forces facilitated this success. The US natural gas boom and later the declining cost of renewable energy greatly helped the organizers' case. "If you want to kill a power project, focus on economics," as one attorney describes the approach. Opponents of coal plants called attention to the cost inefficiency of coal relative to other fuels. They sought to enforce "regulatory procedures that forced coal plant proposals into 1-on-1 cost competition with alternatives," recounts organizer Ted Nace in his chronicle of the movement's early years. Protests and lawsuits often stopped coal-inclined regulators from approving plant proposals and utility executives from signing contracts. In assessing the factors that allowed for the defeat of coal plants, Nace concludes that "typically it was a combination: bad economics plus a good shove by activists," whose opposition contributed to "rising construction costs, legal challenges, public and political opposition, and regulatory delays."[46] Regulators, investors, and utility executives with no moral objection to climate genocide could still be swayed by the dollars and cents.

The list of hindrances often cited by industry reflects the multifaceted strategy of anticoal organizers. They took aim at multiple targets, seeking to maximize the chance that at least one of them—a judge, a regulator, a utility CEO, a key politician, or the investors for a project—would succumb to pressure based on legal, economic, and/or political rationales. As in most movements there was a key role for lawyers. Meticulous attorneys, either working pro bono or paid by activists' fundraising efforts, unleashed a barrage of litigation against industry. As Nace's account suggests, lawsuits often targeted state and federal regulatory agencies to force the regulators to obey environmental and Indigenous rights laws and to ensure that coal could not evade "cost competition with alternatives."

Outside the courtroom organizers targeted those who purchased, funded, and insured coal. They organized "direct pressure on utility executives," first appealing to them by "focusing on economics" and then, if that failed, generating negative publicity about how utilities were sticking ratepayers with the bill for projects that were both environmentally destructive and economically unwise.[47] A nationwide divestment campaign targeted the financial sector. RAN and other organizations advocated not only divestment by shareholders but an end to bank loans and insurance coverage for the sector. They began to target the megabanks like Citi, JP Morgan Chase, and Bank of America with a combination of public protests, civil disobedience, and negative publicity campaigns.[48] By the late 2010s insurers and asset managers had also become key targets. In 2017 the Australia-based Sunrise Project launched Insure Our Future, a global network targeting insurers. The Stop the Money Pipeline coalition, formed in 2020 to pressure financial institutions, included over two hundred organizational members by 2022.[49]

The effects of any one battle were impossible to measure. A victory in one place—a judicial or regulatory ruling against a new coal plant, a small change in regulatory protocol, a new climate commitment by a financial institution—sent a signal to the entire financial sector about the risk of new projects. By 2007 this cascading effect had begun to multiply the industry's defeats, even in reliably Republican states. Nace traces the impact:

> In Montana, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Michigan, judges and regulators handed out rejection slips to coal plants. In North Dakota, Arizona, Washington, and New York, companies withdrew projects on their own initiative, citing such factors as rising costs, public opposition, and the prospect of carbon dioxide regulation. Citigroup downgraded the stocks of mining companies Peabody Energy, Arch Coal, and Foundation Coal Holdings, and that negative assessment further tarnished the prospects of companies seeking financing.… The more coal plants were canceled, the greater the risk in the eyes of bond issuers and other financiers of approving such plants. The greater the risk, the higher the risk premiums that utilities would be forced to pay.[50]

The cascade accelerated in the years that followed. In 2014 Peabody warned that "divestment efforts affecting the investment community … could significantly affect demand for our products or our securities." Two years later the company declared bankruptcy as its "cash flows worsened and access to capital markets evaporated."[51] Peabody's travails were not unique. By 2016 big banks as well as "more daring investors like hedge funds and private equity firms, which are usually eager to pounce on industries in distress," were "shying away from coal because of deep uncertainty about its future." Coal loans were "increasingly off limits for many banks" and other providers of capital, said the "bankers and industry lawyers" consulted by the *New York Times*. "No one is getting funding for new coal mines," lamented the CEO of mining giant Glencore in 2022.[52] This was not just an automatic decision based on math, but rather a collective and subjective judgment by financial executives in response to the full range of political and economic problems facing the coal sector—one of them being the anticoal movement's persistent efforts to obstruct operations.

Governments also took notice, even in countries known for their commitment to coal. In 2021 an internal report by the pro-coal Australian government warned that the government's unabashed support for climate destruction could lead to "increased capital costs for Australian governments, firms and households reflecting increased perceived financial risks; trade action against Australian exports intended to offset any competitive advantage derived from perceived weaker abatement policies; or lower demand for specific Australian products reflecting potential consumer concerns about a perceived lack of action on climate."[53] This is a dynamic often seen among capitalists: once a few major producers initiate a change (often under pressure from below), they try to ensure their competitors also adopt the change so that the "first movers" won't face a competitive disadvantage. The threat of punishment by other capitalists, by states acting on behalf of their capitalists, and by customers can help compel the laggard companies and governments to fall in line.[54]

Targeting insurance companies has been an especially fruitful strategy of the anticoal movement. There are many potential sources of financing for fossil fuel companies but a much more limited pool of insurers. Hindering access to insurance also hinders access to finance. As one insurance CEO says, "if you don't have the insurance, you will have no financing—whether it's private, public, from an insurer, from an asset manager, whatever."[55] Once the movement began winning climate commitments from a handful of major insurers, the cascade effect accelerated. In 2018 industry sources told the *Financial Times* that insurers' anticoal pledges "have yet to affect the availability or price of insurance." By 2021, however, more and more insurers were ending their underwriting for coal, which led coal and utility companies to complain about skyrocketing insurance premiums. "Coal insurance is harder to get, it's expensive, there are all sorts of caveats on it, and you might not be offered it," said one insurance partner from a leading global firm.[56] Some insurance brokers who worked with the coal and utility companies complained that "this is a top-down policy imposed by the insurers' head offices based on ethical guidelines, and is not a commercial decision."[57] In reality it was still a commercial decision: the head offices were deciding that conceding to the movement would ultimately be better for profits since it would help insurers avoid risky coverage contracts and possible damage to their reputations. The movement had succeeded by shifting how insurance executives operationalized the profit motive. Industry analysts expect that "environmental, social and governance ["ESG"] issues will grow in their influence in insurance industry decision-making" in the coming years, leading insurers to adopt "detailed underwriting policies and investment mandates incorporating measures like ESG investment screening and restrictions." This shift will be more pronounced if insurers are faced with "stakeholder pressure" that poses "reputational" risks.[58]

Which party controls the federal government has not been a decisive factor in the downward trajectory of the coal industry. More coal-fired plant capacity was retired during the Trump presidency (2017–20) than during Obama's second term (2013–16).[59] Some of the Democrats' rhetoric and policy measures have influenced the flow of investments, but that factor has been less significant than others. Although Obama, Biden, and other Democrats are often said to be waging a "war on coal," this rhetoric greatly overstates both their hostility toward the coal industry and their impact on it.[60]

The coal barons' whining is not without foundation, however. The real war on coal has been waged by hundreds of local and national organizations, which have exploited market shifts to accelerate the industry's decline. Coal is by no means dead, and coal burning is still rising in some places.[61] But the sector has been greatly weakened and its future beyond the 2020s appears dismal. The party of the genocidal consensus has little power to reverse this trend. The movement's remarkable progress since the early 2000s shows that victory over coal is possible even if most of the federal government is trying to prop it up.

Keeping Oil and Gas in the Ground

Maintaining a habitable Earth depends on our ability to do the same with the other fossil fuels: to not only stop new oil and gas projects but to shut down existing drilling and infrastructure before the projected retirement dates. The oil and gas industries are less vulnerable than coal in many ways. Oil and gas are a much bigger share of the world's total energy mix and a bigger share of stock market value, and they remain more cost-efficient than coal. Finance has thus been much slower to desert these sectors. The economic arguments about "stranded assets" and "transition risk" apply to oil and gas as well, but investors typically view oil and gas as longer-term fixtures in the global energy market. The economic rationale for exiting these sectors is therefore less obvious to elite decision-makers.

However, recent victories against the oil and gas industries suggest a way forward. The movement's progress parallels the anticoal movement in many ways. On the demand side, the movement has targeted power plants, manufacturers, municipalities, and large institutions like universities to reduce their consumption of oil and gas. These efforts have involved directly targeting corporate and institutional leaders as well as pressuring regulators, judges, and politicians to impose restrictions on them. Many wins have been at the local level, such as campuses or cities that have committed to electrification, sourcing electricity from renewables, and energy efficiency and conservation measures.[62] At the state level, activists have won climate laws that mandate reductions in the share of electricity generated by fossil fuels and have used those laws to pressure regulators into limiting the construction or upgrade of gas-fired power plants. Recent regulations in California, New York, and other states require the phaseout of most gasoline-powered engines.[63] All these measures send signals to investors about the decline of fossil fuel demand in the near future.

On the supply side, activists have sought to “keep it in the ground” by preventing drilling and carbon infrastructure. To do so they have forged coalitions among Indigenous communities whose water supplies are threatened by pipeline spills, other landowners seeking to protect their land, communities concerned about water and air pollution, and people everywhere who seek to limit global heating. Though demand-side victories have sometimes been won through conventional means like lobbying, lawsuits, and submitting public comments, actions to suppress supply have often been more confrontational. Organizers have used a multipronged strategy that combines sustained public protests, civil disobedience, boycott and divestment campaigns, lawsuits, and sometimes vandalism. As with coal, the movement has enhanced the risk attached to new investments in drilling and pipelines. In so doing, it has scared away some of the investors, lenders, and insurers on which the oil and gas sectors rely.

An early flashpoint in the supply-side struggle was the fight over the Keystone XL pipeline (KXL). Proposed by TransCanada in 2008, the pipeline was supposed to carry tar sands oil from Alberta, Canada, to the coast of Texas. The project appeared on track until 2011 when opponents like 350. org began organizing large-scale protests and online petitions targeting the Obama administration and Congress. By conservative estimates, several hundred thousand people submitted messages opposing the pipeline. The administration was sending mixed signals. Even after the protests Obama announced his support for the southern half of the pipeline, stretching from Nebraska to Texas, but promised further environmental review of the northern half. However, his State Department hired an environmental consultant recommended by TransCanada and repeatedly insisted that the pipeline would have “no significant effect on carbon emissions.” As Obama hedged, protests continued and escalated into mass civil disobedience, much of it under the auspices of the new organization Tar Sands Blockade. Simultaneous litigation delayed the project repeatedly. In early 2015 a district court judge in Nebraska granted landowners’ request for an injunction against the company’s use of eminent domain to seize property. In November 2015 Obama finally announced he would not authorize the project’s completion.[64] A year later Obama responded to protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) with a belated veto of that project, a symbolic move since President-elect Trump had vowed to resuscitate it.[65]

The Obama administration's mildly sympathetic response to antipipeline protests, juxtaposed with Trump's zealous support for KXL and DAPL, has led many analysts to conclude that defeating a pipeline depends on having "a favorable president" in office.[66] But the chronology of antipipeline struggles since 2011 suggests that the party affiliation of the president is not as important as such accounts imply. Aside from KXL and DAPL, Obama was consistently pro-pipeline. Biden did reject KXL upon taking office but refused to oppose DAPL, the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline, or others targeted by protesters. In Canada the liberal Trudeau administration has used pro-climate rhetoric but has been a strong supporter of pipelines and tar sands oil. Conversely, Trump was a vocal cheerleader for the industry but he could not prevent major setbacks for it on his watch. These seeming contradictions highlight the fact that there are many other variables helping to determine the industry's fortunes.

In fact, as with coal, some of the movement's most notable victories against oil and gas occurred under Trump. The industry's vulnerability became most visible during Trump's last year in office, when the COVID-19 recession and other global developments slashed demand for fossil fuels, drove the industry deeper into debt, and made loans harder to obtain.[67] Then, in the space of a few days in July 2020, the movement won a rapid-fire succession of victories:

- the future of DAPL, which had been completed over Indigenous resistance, suddenly faced new uncertainty when a federal judge ruled that its permit had violated environmental law,
- the Supreme Court upheld a ruling by a Montana district court judge that had stopped construction of KXL,
- an Indigenous lawsuit against a Marathon Oil pipeline in North Dakota led the Bureau of Indian Affairs to close the pipeline down, and
- Dominion Energy and Duke Energy officially cancelled their Atlantic Coast Pipeline.[68]

As *Bloomberg* noted, it was “a deluge of bad news” for the industry—and quite unexpected at a moment when the White House was aggressively promoting the industry’s interests and the Supreme Court was controlled by a far-right majority.[69]

Prior to 2020, pipeline companies faced with protests and litigation had already lost huge amounts of money fending off the resistance. A 2018 study had found that DAPL’s total cost was about twice the $3.8 billion originally projected. The overrun was due in large part to costly delays that were “directly correlated with the cumulative social pressure opposing DAPL.” The stock price of Energy Transfer Partners, the builder, “significantly underperformed relative to market expectations during the event study period,” and it suffered “a long-term decline in value that persisted after the project was completed.” The study also quantified the impact of divestment campaigns targeting banks that lent money to the project. Unlike in most prior divestment campaigns, organizers of the #NoDAPL movement had targeted financial institutions over their involvement in a specific project. To put pressure on banks, they had not only organized individual customers to close their accounts, but more importantly had pushed municipalities to do so. Seattle and several other city governments had closed their accounts with Wells Fargo, depriving the bank of over $4 billion in lost capital. These costs were “compounded by damages to reputation, brand, and customer goodwill that banks suffered as a result of DAPL.”[70]

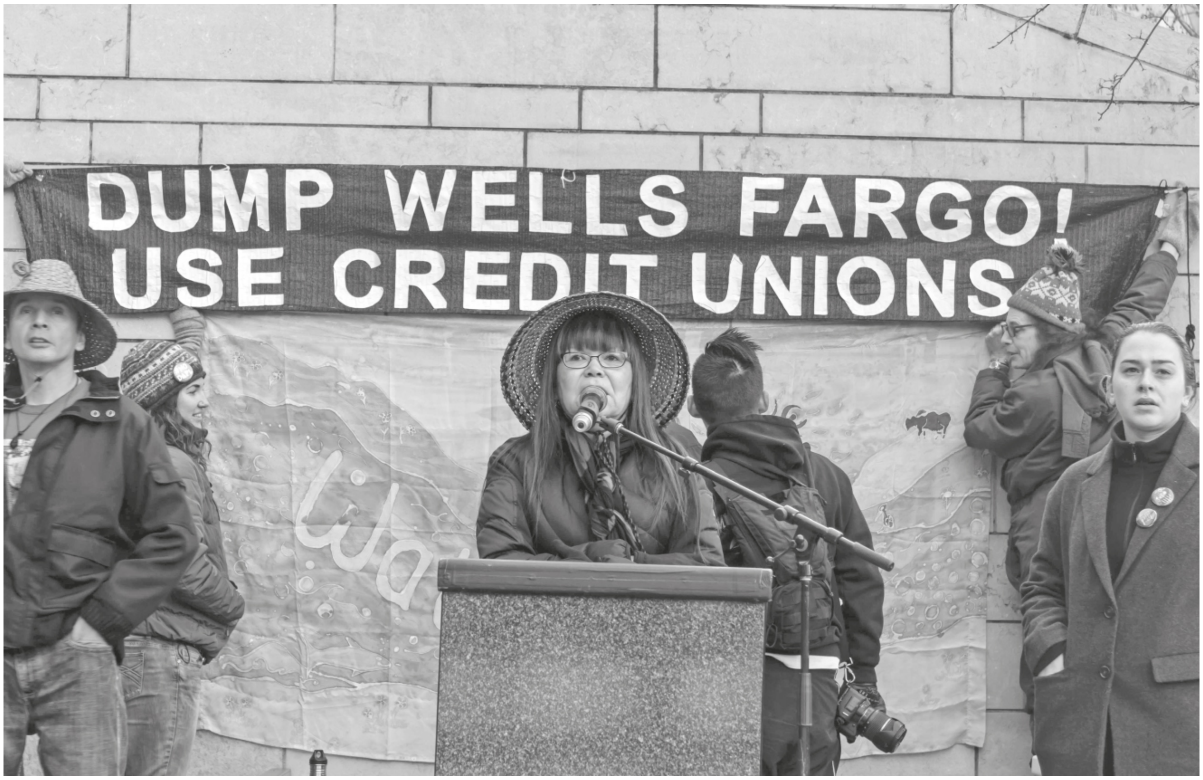

Figure 4: Seattle closed its bank account with Wells Fargo in response to anti-DAPL protests. This photo is from January 2017. (Wikimedia Commons)

More serious was the possibility of a cascade effect that threatened the viability of future oil and gas projects. The events of July 2020 added greatly to this risk. Although the ultimate outcomes of the ongoing court litigation were uncertain, the effects were likely to be far-reaching. As with coal, the implications of any one battle were unquantifiable. As a *Bloomberg* story predicted in July 2020, “Even if one, some or all of this week’s pipeline defeats are temporary, the losses (and the rising local and environmental opposition behind them) may scare off investors. Building expensive natural gas infrastructure may not make sense when there’s a reasonable chance pipeline operators will face significant public pushback.”[71]

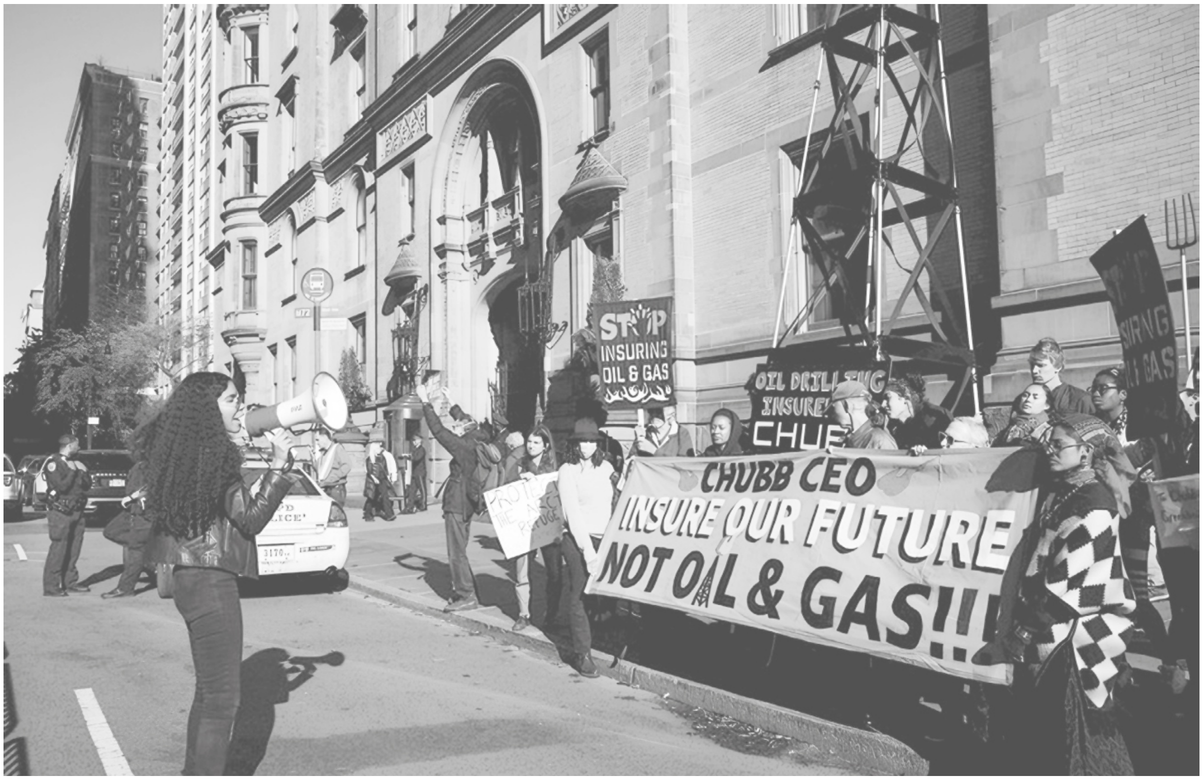

Figure 5: Climate activists have increasingly targeted insurance companies like Chubb, as in this October 2022 protest outside the home of CEO Evan Greenberg. (Photo by Katie Godowski; courtesy of RAN)

The implications were not lost on the industry. A pipeline lobby group warned that prior court rulings against DAPL were depriving investors of "certainty from the government" and thereby putting all fossil fuel infrastructure projects "in potential peril."[72] Energy Transfer had made the same argument in 2017 when it sued DAPL opponents, claiming that the company had suffered "impaired access to the capital markets and increased cost of capital," "lost relationships with investors, lending partners, and other contractual relationships," and numerous other damages.[73] The decisions on the two North Dakota pipelines were especially significant since they threatened already operating projects. As one former pipeline executive put it, this meant that even projects that successfully weathered a storm of protests and secured the necessary permits to operate might be shuttered long before repaying their immense debts. With that prospect, "I think it's going to be incredibly difficult for anybody to invest in any kind of [fossil fuel] infrastructure." Echoing his view, North Dakota governor

Doug Burgum warned that the DAPL ruling might be "a tipping point, which actually could really cripple production in North Dakota."[74]

Is this just hyperbole? Certainly the industry loves to cast itself as a victim, especially when suing its enemies. It exaggerates as a way of pressuring political officials. Yet the threat is real, as evidenced by the number of cancelled projects and the volatile financial situation of many companies in recent years. The industry itself also stands to lose from exaggerating too much, since highly pessimistic statements can deter investors. Saying that "it's going to be incredibly difficult for anybody to invest" is likely to heighten investor concerns. Moreover, similar sentiments are often expressed in more sober publications consulted by industry insiders. Since that readership depends on accurate information about the political terrain, those publications are somewhat more reliable than public rhetoric. In 2021 an energy consultant writing in *Pipeline & Gas Journal* warned his audience to prepare for more lawsuits and protests, "resulting in further capital cost increases and longer overall pipeline approval and construction timelines." Reports on particular pipelines regularly lament the "legal challenges from environmental groups that have slowed and added to the cost of the project[s]." The president of the American Public Gas Association complains that "the number of lawsuits being filed to challenge pipeline construction" has added "costs and time to the development of a pipeline, which in some cases has just forced the pipelines to throw up their hands and walk away from projects."[75]

Regulators' decisions have compounded the risks facing investors. One key struggle involved a natural gas compressor station in operation in Weymouth, Massachusetts, which is central to the Northeast's gas distribution network. Local organizers had long fought the project due to its greenhouse gas emissions and local environmental harms but had been unable to stop its operations. In early 2021 Trump's appointees at FERC voted 3 to 2 to conduct a new review process, citing what the commission chairperson called "serious environmental justice questions." The decision was "seemingly unprecedented" according to one commission observer and thus caused major alarm in the industry.[76] In response, numerous oil and gas interests filed complaints as intervenors in the case. As with court rulings against DAPL and other projects, their concern was with the potential legal precedent and the impact of "legal uncertainty" on the availability of cheap financing. Gas industry representatives warned that the commission's reopening of the review process "is a concern to all interstate pipelines who [*sic*] are anticipating making future infrastructure investments," and could affect "the natural gas industry as a whole."[77] The commission's decision highlights the importance of regulatory personnel and thus the importance of the movement's pressure on regulators, which has consisted of both public protests and litigation seeking to force the commission to take greenhouse gas emissions and local environmental harms into account. Although the commission ultimately decided to allow the compressor station to remain in operation, industry allies remained worried that the commission "could, in the future," decide "to unwind an already-approved pipeline project."[78]

Movement pressure on Wall Street produced still more bad news as Trump's term wound down. In late 2020 Trump tried to open the 1.6-million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska for oil and gas drilling. The problem was that most of the top banks bowed to the movement's pressure and refused to fund operations in the area.[79] The problem went beyond just the refuge. Republican lawmakers and regulators complained that many financial institutions had recently adopted "policies against investing in new oil and gas operations," potentially thwarting hopes for new drilling in other locations. Moreover, "some of the nation's largest banks had stopped doing business altogether with one or more major energy industry categories." The complainants noted that lenders were "folding to activist environmental groups' pressure" and redirecting loans to other projects and sectors.[80] Movement pressure on lenders was raising the cost of financing or even making big loans impossible to obtain for certain projects. Protests targeting insurance companies were also having an impact on their willingness to underwrite.[81] These early signs of financial disinvestment were starting to limit how much drilling was possible. Also in 2020, the Canadian company Teck Resources cancelled its plans for "the largest open-pit tar sands mine ever proposed." It explained that "global capital markets are changing rapidly" and that "investors and customers" were "increasingly" concerned about climate destruction.[82]

The power of the US resistance has been magnified by the antipipeline movement in Canada, where tar sands oil originates. As *Bloomberg* reported in 2022, "opposition from environmentalists, Indigenous groups, and some provincial governments has stymied virtually all Canadian pipeline construction, forcing billions of dollars of heavy oil produced in Alberta to be sold at a discount in the US rather than being loaded on tankers bound for more profitable markets in Asia." By the late 2010s "the alliance between climate activists and Indigenous people came to look like an existential threat to oil sands operators in northern Alberta."[83] There too the movement has targeted finance. Local organizers have pressured banks and insurers to stop supporting tar sands extraction and pipeline construction, their efforts amplified by RAN, Stop the Money Pipeline, Mazaska Talks, and other national-level organizations in Canada and the United States that focus their energies on the financial sector. In 2021 the operator of the Trans Mountain Pipeline admitted it was incurring "significantly higher cost" for insurance after the movement got Chubb, Zurich, and several other insurers to exit the project.[84]

Indigenous resistance poses special problems for the industry. Indigenous communities have not only spearheaded much of the organizing, they also have unique legal protections under US and Canadian law. Although those protections are often disregarded by courts, they do provide legal instruments not available to other groups, meaning that "the Indigenous people living near energy infrastructure are far more dangerous from a legal point of view, particularly in Canada." As two industry lawyers warned in 2015, oil and gas companies in Canada "face increasing Aboriginal above ground risk," a technical term for the Indigenous-led resistance. "The impact to energy developers is readily apparent and evidenced by the increased legal, regulatory, financial, and reputational risks associated with permitting delays, operational disruptions, protests, and negative media attention."[85]

To neutralize this opposition the industry has resorted to increasingly desperate measures. It has sued governments over policies like the KXL cancellation that limit their profits.[86] Its political representatives have tried to legally coerce financial institutions into staying invested in coal, oil, and gas, warning them against "discriminating against America's energy sector." Trump's regulatory team tried to force banks to invest in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and many state governments have passed laws to punish banks that "discriminate."[87] The impact of these efforts is not yet clear. Although they have made financial executives less likely to trumpet their climate commitments publicly, whether they can force real alterations in investment decisions is questionable. Most clean energy investors and developers say the backlash has had zero impact on their investment behavior, and zero percent say they have "significantly" altered their plans in response.[88] The fact that the state laws raise borrowing costs could also limit their enforcement. One clue is the limited success of the gun industry's earlier effort to punish banks that discriminated against weapons dealers, which proved impractical to enforce.[89]

Other coercive measures target activists directly. The use of dogs and water cannons against anti-DAPL protesters at Standing Rock garnered widespread negative publicity in 2016. Later reporting revealed the industry's systematic use of surveillance, incarceration, and violence against protesters. The firm that Energy Transfer hired, TigerSwan, privately boasts that its "counterinsurgency approach" aims "to identify and break down the activist network." As noted above, Energy Transfer also tried to sue protesters for the extra costs it incurred as a result of the resistance. Many states have now passed laws at the industry's behest to bring felony charges against those who "impede or inhibit operations" of the fossil fuel industry.[90]

The flip side of this coercion is co-optation. Some of the industry is pursuing schemes to give Canada's Indigenous communities a greater stake in the continuation of oil and gas extraction through employment and ownership shares. To ensure that the industry can "operate with minimal interruption from Aboriginal above ground risk over the long-term," its lawyers advise that Indigenous nations be invited to "equitably participate" in extraction. That will ensure that they "constructively engage with industry." A similar approach has been recommended by analysts seeking to minimize community resistance to fracking. This is the enlightened prong of the industry's response to resistance: offering equitable participation in climate genocide.[91]

The industry's reactions to opposition reflect its precarious grip on other capitalist sectors and on society at large. Despite their vast economic power and success in blocking major climate reforms, fossil fuel companies realize that the tide could turn decisively against them in the near future. Even within the industry there is widespread agreement that "there's no stopping the energy transition." The industry itself even claims to support that transition.[92] The question is how fast the transition will happen. Will fossil fuels be phased out over the next quarter-century? Or will they decline only slowly, propped up by government subsidies and still burned in large quantities well past 2050, as the fossil fuel industry would like?

A Tipping Point?

Obviously, we're not on the brink of abolishing fossil fuels. Individual victories like those described above seem unlikely to usher in the energy transition before the biosphere passes irreversible tipping points. We need a rapid acceleration of investment in renewables and a rapid contraction in oil, gas, and coal. Investment in renewable energy, electric vehicles, and "clean tech" has risen quickly in recent years, but not at the pace we need, and investment in fossil fuels remains high.[93]

However, change in economic and political systems doesn't proceed in linear fashion. Some analysts have speculated about the prospects for a "positive tipping point" beyond which capitalists desert fossil fuels en masse, bringing about a "decarbonization leap" in the global energy system. One recent study predicts that "an avalanche effect would be triggered if national banks and insurance companies warned against the global risk associated to stranded assets from fossil-fuel projects." Billionaire investor Jeremy Grantham predicts that investors will divest from fossil fuels "very slowly" for a while longer, then "all at once." The fossil fuel industry has used the same metaphor, warning that individual defeats might lead to "a tipping point, which could really cripple production."[94]

It’s very plausible. A 2022 Bank of America analysis shows that oil and gas have already been “hit by widespread divestment” by investors and are “set for plenty more” in the next few years. The banking and insurance industries already view climate as the biggest risk to their businesses.[95] While this assessment has not stopped most big players from continuing to invest in oil and gas, this could change rapidly. Grantham’s “all at once” scenario is not outlandish. One simulation predicts that if just 10–20 percent of current investors abandon fossil fuels it could “burst the carbon bubble,” triggering mass exodus by remaining investors and a rapid collapse of share prices. Even if the vast majority of investors are purely concerned about economic returns, they would divest as a herd once the 10–20 percent threshold was reached. And contrary to fears that fossil fuel owners would simply race to burn everything they can before their business collapses, recent modeling concludes that they are more likely to divest than to keep burning.[96]

Forecasting capitalist behavior is difficult since the future of energy production and consumption will be shaped by many interacting variables. The above predictions are partly contingent upon investors’ expectation of “strong future climate policies” in the United States and globally. The prospect that governments will adopt those policies greatly magnifies the risk that fossil fuel assets will become unprofitable to burn and that investments in those assets will produce losses. The movement’s efforts to pressure businesses and investors are thus amplified in contexts where governments are taking meaningful reform steps. Government policy comprises many different elements, including not only legislation but executive-branch regulations, enforcement patterns, judicial decisions, willingness to repress protest, and so on. It includes local, state, and federal policies as well as those of foreign states, all of which help to shape the investment outlook for the fossil fuel sector. Major portions of the US state remain dedicated to propping up fossil fuels through subsidies, deregulation, bailouts, and judicial intervention. Other portions, including some courts and state governments, are less dedicated and thus more vulnerable to movement pressures.

The heterogeneity of the private sector means more unpredictability. Shareholders, lenders, and insurers may take economic action against fossil fuel companies, while diverse capitalists may also lobby governments for policies that reduce fossil fuel demand and supply and increase the riskiness of future investments. There is significant movement in some of these realms, leading to a widespread sense among analysts that the demise of fossil fuels is already "happening in a death-by-a-thousand-cuts way," albeit too slowly for those who want to avert catastrophe.[97] All these public- and private-sector variables will interact with others that are beyond the movement's control, including geopolitical rivalries and climate breakdown.

The key question for the movement, again, is how we can best contribute to the ruling class's desertion of fossil fuels. The cases profiled in this chapter highlight the importance of combining disruptive protest and legal action—the "social movements and lawyers" approach—while building organizations and coalitions that can maximize that disruption and educate the broader public. The efficacy of this multipronged strategy is recognized by fossil fuel CEOs who bemoan the "rising tide of protests, litigation, and vandalism" facing their operations, and who warn that "the level of intensity has ramped up," with "more opponents" who are "better organized."[98] These developments are being closely watched by the ruling class. Fossil fuel executives know that more elites may turn against them as the popular opposition intensifies.

I have emphasized the impact of movement strategies aimed at restricting fossil fuel production and transport. This "supply-side" approach can take several forms. Movements may pressure politicians and regulators to regulate or ban certain activities, such as fracking, oil drilling, or pipeline construction. The closure of particular fossil fuel deposits to new investment can send "shock waves through the industry," as in the case of Scotland's recent scrutiny of offshore oil licensing.[99] Movements may also pressure institutional investors or financial institutions to deny support to the fossil fuel industry. They may organize physical resistance to fossil fuel projects on the ground, as pipeline blockaders have done. These tactics are usually complementary to movement-initiated lawsuits against companies and regulators. In 2020 *Bloomberg* speculated that the movement-induced setbacks for the US pipeline industry could "hasten the pace of transition to renewable energy."[100] In other words, energy investors might divert financing to less risky, non-fossil-fuel projects. Government officials could also be forced to expedite or subsidize renewable energy to compensate for the constraints on fossil fuel production.

Efforts to cut demand for fossil fuels have also achieved important wins. The biggest victory is the movement's success in limiting utilities' demand for coal. The movement has helped block or retire hundreds of coal-fired power plants since the turn of the century. Other demand-side measures have included municipal-level building electrification laws, bans on gas hook-ups, and decarbonization of public transit, which have usually been won through people organizing at the local level. As with restrictions on production, a proliferation of local and state policies that cut demand can send a signal to investors about the riskiness of future fossil fuel investments. The fossil fuel industry recognizes the threat and has fought many of those policies tooth and nail.[101]

Another notable development is litigation that seeks to hold fossil fuel companies liable for the harms they have inflicted on society. Between 1986 and 2022 there were over 2,500 climate litigation cases around the world, 72 percent of them in the United States. Most of those cases dated from 2015 or later.[102] Litigants have usually sued governments but increasingly also target "companies with allegations such as breaching a duty of care to prevent climate change or misleading consumers about efforts to address global warming," reports an insurance industry publication.[103] If a significant portion of the state and federal judiciary turns against the industry it could greatly "escalate the perception of risk among investors," as the movement seeks to do. It can also lead insurers to raise prices or refuse coverage for legal liabilities. Legal efforts backed by grassroots organizing have begun to generate cracks in the edifice. This trend could be magnified by judicial rulings in major investment markets overseas.[104]

This chapter has highlighted some of the vulnerabilities of the fossil fuel industry and thus the possibilities for maintaining a habitable Earth. For the most part the US federal government and the governments of fossil fuel–producing US states are subservient to the fossil fuel industry. Nonetheless, the industry remains vulnerable to growing popular resistance and to opposition from other portions of the ruling class. Its chokehold over most US government entities has not stopped it from suffering important defeats. These defeats reveal the existence of pressure points that the climate movement can exploit even when the electoral context is hostile.

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PART II:

Learning from Nonclimate Movements

CHAPTER THREE

"A Measure of Necessity"

Abolishing Slavery

AFTER THE CONFEDERACY LAUNCHED ITS WAR IN APRIL 1861, BENJAMIN BUTLER led a contingent of Union forces to Maryland. Their dual mission was to defend against Confederate attacks and to dissuade the state from joining the secessionists. Upon arriving Butler promised local slaveholders he would crush "any insurrection against the laws of Maryland." Just as he promised, escaped slaves who tried to join his forces were sent back, most probably to torture or execution. Butler's actions were the norm among Union officers. During the war's early phases, the Lincoln administration sought to preserve slavery in order to win over slaveholders, particularly in border regions like Maryland. As the commander in St. Louis wrote on May 14, escaped slaves to that point had been "carefully sent back to their owners." He deemed abolition an outrageous notion and was "a little astonished that such a question could be seriously put." As he reassured a local Unionist, "I should as soon expect to hear that the orders of the Government were directed towards the overthrow of any other kind of property as of this in negro slaves."[1]

The war brought plenty of astonishment. Despite the Lincoln administration's efforts to placate slaveholders, a war for the Union soon became a war for abolition. As the South made rapid gains early in the war, Union leaders grudgingly began accepting Black escapees into their ranks as soldiers and workers. When Butler was transferred from Maryland to Fort Monroe in tidewater Virginia, he was forced to respond to "very numerous" groups of enslaved workers fleeing to the fort. "I am in the utmost doubt what to do with this species of property," he wrote to the army chief. He did not wish to alienate the slaveholders, but they were “using their negroes in the batteries” and thus undermining the Union’s military campaign. He decided that “as a military question it would seem to be a measure of necessity to deprive their masters of their services.” Forced into this corner, he accepted the escapees and labeled them “contraband,” a term for property that could be legitimately seized during wartime.[2]

Butler’s May 1861 decision would be replicated throughout the war, as local commanders and the federal government were forced to take incremental steps against slavery before ultimately embracing full, immediate emancipation without compensation to slaveholders. After the war the federal government also came to support civil rights for Black people and voting rights for Black men, and it made a robust commitment to interracial democracy in the South. Changes that most whites had dismissed as too radical (and that most Black people had probably thought impossible) in 1860 became the reality by 1870. The radical moment was fleeting: the white supremacist backlash in the South, and acquiescence from the North, soon reversed most of the gains of Reconstruction. Yet the coercion and terror of the Jim Crow era should not obscure the revolutionary nature of the 1860s and early 1870s.[3]

As Butler’s words imply, abolition and other attacks on the slaveholding elite became “measures of necessity” for the Union leadership, which represented the interests of northern counter-elites. The sectional tensions between the northern and southern economies had grown more pronounced in the decades before the war, as reflected in policy disputes over tariffs, infrastructure spending, land grants in the western territories, and central banking. Northern industrialists and western landowners had increasingly come to see southern slaveholders as an impediment to national prosperity. However, they were content to let slavery continue as long as it remained in the South and did not directly jeopardize their interests. Even as the secession crisis loomed, most of them initially urged accommodation. This position was reflected in the platform of the Republican Party formed in 1854. Most Republicans were philosophically opposed to slavery but did not seek to abolish it right away, hoping instead that blocking its expansion would result in its “ultimate extinction,” in Lincoln’s 1858 phrase.[4] In short, the economic interests of northern capitalists did not lead them to abolitionist politics.

What transformed mere tension among competing elites into outright confrontation was mass disruption from below. Enslaved workers were the most essential actors in this saga. By 1861 their resistance to slavery, particularly the many thousands of daring escapes, had brought freedom for thousands of individuals and catalyzed seismic shifts in national politics. Slave resistance inspired the northern abolitionist movement, which in turn restricted northern elites' ability to continue appeasing the South. It also led slaveholders to take desperate actions that angered non-abolitionist whites in the North, such as barging into northern communities in search of runaways and jockeying for western territories, and that repelled even some southern whites. During the war, hundreds of thousands of slaves fled the plantations, fought for or otherwise aided the Union, and engaged in various other resistance that undermined the Confederacy and triggered key changes among elites as well as rank-and-file whites.

The role of the enslaved in winning their liberation was the key point in W.E.B. Du Bois's 1935 analysis of their "general strike against slavery." Dozens of later studies have confirmed and expanded this argument, highlighting the diverse ways that individual and collective resistance contributed to abolition in the United States and throughout the Americas.[5] Nonetheless, the story of emancipation still found in many schoolbooks and Hollywood movies is that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. In this latter telling, enslaved people are usually cast as passive or at least marginal to abolition; yes, some resisted their plight, but their resistance "had no political consequences."[6] Nowadays scholars who reject the Du Bois thesis are more nuanced. While recognizing that slaves' resistance played some role in emancipation, they question whether that resistance was the central causal factor. For this reason, the Du Boisian argument warrants some elaboration, to which the bulk of this chapter is devoted.

The final two sections of the chapter reflect on the strategic takeaways, for social movements in general and specifically the climate movement. Despite obvious differences between then and now, abolition remains useful for understanding how a capitalist (or quasi-capitalist) sector can be defeated in a short period of time.[7] The main lesson is that a disruptive minority can catalyze rapid and large-scale change. By threatening the profits and stability of certain elites, a sizable minority of radicals can force those elites to confront, as "a measure of necessity," a parasitic elite sector such as slave-holders or the fossil fuel industry.

The Slave Power

From the nation's founding until 1861, southern slaveholders successfully thwarted most challenges to their wealth and power. Starting with the Constitution itself, they won repeated compromises from northern elites that allowed them to maintain slavery in southern states and to expand into new regions west of the thirteen colonies. Their ability to safeguard and extend their privileges at the national level led antislavery voices to denounce a "Slave Power" that sought to control Washington and the national destiny.[8]

The political influence of the Slave Power was largely based on its economic weight, both real and perceived. Cotton production, which expanded enormously in the early nineteenth century, was a significant piece of the national economy and the leading export. However much financiers, industrialists, and merchants came to resent the slaveholders for holding back northern and western growth, they also had material stakes in the southern economy in the form of loans, raw material purchases, and the sale of goods to the South. Slaveholders constantly cited these relationships to prove that northern states were dependent on slavery. Alongside their religious and pseudoscientific justifications for slavery, the economic argument was a central defense against critics. In 1837 a leading South Carolinian intellectual, William Harper, wrote that the "prosperity" and "civilization" of the North "have been for the most part created by the existence of Slavery." The benefits were universally enjoyed. Slaves' production of cotton allowed "the poor to obtain cheap and becoming clothing" and shielded white labor from competition with Black labor. Even the slaves benefited from the material prosperity that slavery afforded; it was partly "in defence of the slaves themselves that we refuse to emancipate them." Harper and other proslavery writers sometimes conceded that their system was not morally ideal, but "there is evil in any institution" and the goal was "to mitigate" evils by choosing between imperfect options. If the United States were to abolish slavery it would only "increase all the evils of which we complain," leading to moral chaos and, materially speaking, to higher prices and unemployment. Confederate leaders evidently believed their own economic argument. They predicted that the North would have to accept secession because of its dependence on the slave economy. The slave system would be "safe, because she is needed."[9]

They were obviously too confident. They were defeated in part because they overestimated the extent to which capitalists elsewhere depended on slavery. The relationship of slavery to capitalism and industrial growth has long been debated. In 1944 the Trinidadian scholar Eric Williams argued that Caribbean slavery was integral to Britain's economic takeoff but that colonial slavery later became a fetter on British capitalism, leading to its abolition.[10] In the 1970s economic historians used statistical methods to evaluate the relative efficiency of slavery and its impacts on US and European capitalist development. Many concluded that while slavery was enormously profitable for slaveholders, it ultimately held back economic development in the South and became less vital to industrial capitalists in the early nineteenth century.[11] Textile manufacturers needed cotton, but they could have obtained it from nonslave markets just as cheaply (as they did in the decades after the Civil War, when cotton prices fell to their pre-1860 levels). By the 1850s the North's growing economy was also much more diverse than just textiles and only relied on the South for a small portion of its total trade. Moreover, despite the unimaginable horrors inflicted on enslaved people and the high profits still enjoyed by slaveholders in 1860, the South's labor system was in many ways inefficient. Labor supply was constrained, slaveholders' ability to relocate their "capital" disincentivized investment in infrastructure, and the need to keep slaves working year-round meant that plantations were mostly self-sufficient in food production, which limited their integration into the US national market.[12] The Slave Power also blocked projects that northern capital wanted, such as homestead, railroad, and infrastructure legislation, and its efforts to expand threatened northern investments in western territories. It thus undercut its own propaganda message that slavery boosted national prosperity. Although this economic tension did not make abolitionists of northern capitalists—they still benefited from slavery in other ways and did not yet see emancipation as "a measure of necessity"—it did reduce their commitment to slavery. As historian Gavin Wright argues, "major economic interest groups acquiesced in abolition because they no longer saw slavery as indispensable for their political or economic agendas."[13]

Their acquiescence came after the conflict between slaveholders and enslaved had escalated to the point of secession, and after several years of war. Slaves in the antebellum United States preserved their humanity in myriad ways, braving murder, torture, rape, family separation, and other retaliation. In addition to enabling personal and collective survival, this resistance also ignited decisive changes in national politics. Between 1776 and 1861 slave defiance destabilized the slave system, with reverberations all across society. In the short run, slaveholders were able to suppress the threats through a combination of terror, territorial expansion, and policy victories like the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. In the long run, their increasingly desperate responses to slave resistance and abolitionism undermined their chokehold on the country. The enslaved were the root cause of this shift. This was the other meaning of "slave power."

Running away was the most common form of open defiance. By 1860 perhaps 50,000 enslaved people fled every year, especially from the Upper South or border states.[14] In addition to inflicting economic costs on their enslavers, they "set in motion a chain of events that had far-reaching political effects," notes historian Manisha Sinha. Hundreds of fugitives used the courts to try to secure freedom. Those individual cases fueled a broader abolitionist legal attack on the fugitive slave laws that gave slaveholders the right to enter free territory to recapture the enslaved.[15] As northern courts and legislatures responded with measures that chipped away at those laws, slaveholders responded in their own disruptive ways that eroded the patience of northern whites. Dred and Harriet Scott's lawsuits led to the Supreme Court's reaffirmation of slavery in 1857. Though a short-term victory for slaveholders, the ruling harmed northerners who hoped to acquire western territories without competition from slaveholders.[16] In the Lower North, many whites saw slavecatchers inflict savage violence on people who were peaceful working members of their communities. Whites' "conditional toleration of slave catching" became more untenable; they were forced to choose sides. Many "began to confront slave catchers much more consistently," as historian Robert Churchill shows. This high-profile economic, legal, and political disruption, much of it originating at the local level, also forced national politicians to take sides. Abraham Lincoln, who had supported the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, now publicly condemned the *Dred Scott* decision. Lincoln was still not an abolitionist, but he was being pushed in that direction.[17]

Enslaved people also directly inspired and shaped the abolitionist movement in the North. Occasional episodes of violent resistance, such as Nat Turner's 1831 uprising in Virginia and the 1839 rebellion aboard the *Amistad*, galvanized abolitionist sentiment and converted many to "immediatism," the demand for immediate and full emancipation. Leading white abolitionists were deeply influenced by personal encounters with escaped slaves, who along with free Black abolitionists played central roles in the northern abolitionist movement. That interracial movement in turn gave further moral and material support to defiant slaves, particularly in the form of the Underground Railroad and urban "vigilance committees."[18] Some northerners also went south, destroying slaveholder properties and trying to ignite slave rebellion, most famously in the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry led by John Brown. In the second half of 1860 the abolitionists grew bolder in the expectation of a Lincoln election victory. A mysterious wave of arsons targeted slaveholder properties, perhaps aided by abolitionist infiltrators.[19] Localized disruptions had cascading effects on slaveholders and on politicians in both North and South.

The spread of a new wave of abolitionism in the 1830s, and its growing impact on northern politics, infuriated slaveholders. They mounted all the familiar rhetorical defenses. Intellectuals like William Harper performed the logical contortions seen above. Daily propaganda from slaveholders was less sophisticated, relying on racist epithets and painting themselves as victims of a tyrannical North bent on suppressing their liberty. The South suffered “humiliation and degradation” due to “the systematic aggressions of the north,” cried a South Carolina planter in 1851. The northern states were accused of commandeering the federal government in their favor, when all the slaveholders asked for was to be left alone and to have “an equal opportunity to compete in the territories.” The last straw was the 1860 seizure of the federal government by extremists, the “rabid and fanatical ultraists” out to “destroy the South.”[20] As ludicrous as this rhetoric seems, it was partly based on real threats: internal disruption by enslaved people plus federal restrictions on territorial expansion did threaten to reduce the value of slaveholders’ investments, as many secessionists argued.[21] The slaves’ own resistance was a key initiating factor in this instability. Not only did it directly disrupt slaveholders’ operations, it also contributed indirectly to the growing federal commitment to blocking slavery’s expansion in the western territories. As historian David Williams writes of the secessionists, “underlying their fear was the certain knowledge that slaves wanted freedom. It was that certainty, born of many decades of slave resistance, that led to secession, war, and slavery’s downfall.”[22]

“Necessity Is Master over All”

In 1861 Harry Jarvis of Virginia took advantage of the Union presence on the coast to escape from slavery. He fled to Fort Monroe, where Benjamin Butler had recently been deployed as commander. “I went to him and asked him to let me enlist,” Jarvis later recalled, “but he said it wasn’t a black man’s war. I told him it would be a black man’s war before they got through.”[23]

Jarvis was ultimately proven right, though only after Union leaders tried for a year and a half to suppress the secession without ending slavery or enlisting Black soldiers. Lincoln, the commander in chief, condemned slavery but did not want to confront it directly. In 1837 he had argued that “slavery is founded on injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends to increase rather than abate its evils.” His inclination to compromise with slaveholders continued for another quarter-century. In 1858 he said of Black people, “I think that I would not hold one in slavery at any rate, yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon." After his 1860 election he still preached the value of compromise with slaveholders, even supporting Congress's March 1861 proposal to strip itself of the power to end slavery. In August 1862 he still stressed, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it." Even after the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863, Lincoln continued to advocate the removal of liberated slaves from the country ("colonization") and in 1864 still entertained the idea of paying $400 million in compensation to slaveholders.[24]

Early military policy reflected what abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass called the "neither hot-nor-cold spirit of compromise," with the Union "endeavoring to whip the slaveholders without seriously harming them." In February 1862 General Henry Halleck sought to reassure Tennessee slaveholders, whom he called "our fellow-citizens," that his forces "come merely to crush out rebellion," not "to plunder" their property. Renegade Union commanders who tried to declare abolition in their jurisdictions were overruled by Lincoln.[25] Though clearly influenced by racism, this policy also had a pragmatic logic. Lincoln and many other pro-Union whites hoped that by avoiding abolition they could win over enough slaveholders and other whites, particularly in the border states, to fatally weaken the secessionist forces. Maryland's pro-Union governor told the administration his state would stay loyal "if we can but keep away outside Issues." Lincoln and most pro-Union intellectuals argued—and were probably correct—that "the great mass of whites" in April 1861 had no appetite for immediate abolition and even less for slave insurrection. The same day Fort Sumter was attacked, the *New York Times* warned of "the unutterable horrors of a servile insurrection" and called for any attempters to be executed.[26]

Of course, one could also make a pragmatic argument for why abolition was militarily essential. Douglass was the most prominent exponent of this view. From the start he condemned the Lincoln administration for waging war "with only one hand" and echoed John Brown's prediction that the Union would only prevail by "carrying the war into Africa." Douglass knew a pro-abolition policy would incite more slave escapes, depriving the Confederacy of labor. "So long as slavery is respected and protected by our

Government, the slaveholders can carry on the rebellion, and no longer," because abolition would "destroy that which feeds, clothes, and arms" the secessionists. The liberated would also aid the Union as soldiers and laborers, thus doubling the blow to the Confederacy. He scoffed at those who feared abolition would "offend the Union men in the Border States." In his estimation "the great mass of Union men" in those states had no firm commitment to slavery, and those who did "are not now, and have never been, friends of the Union," so "it would be a real gain to get rid of them." While Douglass's beliefs were rooted in morality, he knew that moral appeals would not move the administration: "Nothing short of dire necessity will bring it to act wisely," he predicted in August 1861. "Governments act from necessity, real or supposed. They move only if they are moved upon.… Necessity is master over all."[27]

What moved Lincoln and his commanders was the realization that only Black people could tip the balance against the Confederacy. Slave resistance was the spark for this realization. When the war started, slaves waited for opportunities to flee across Union lines—a wrenching choice, since they often had to separate from family members and there was no guarantee they would not be returned to their tormenters, as many indeed were. Naturally slave flight was initially concentrated in the Upper South. Within two weeks of the Fort Sumter attack, some five hundred slaves had escaped from Maryland into Pennsylvania. By July about nine hundred had reached Fort Monroe in Virginia, and at least twice that number by December. A Union general reported that "the negroes are getting free pretty fast. It is not done by the army, but they are freeing themselves; and if this war continues long, not a slave will be left in the whole South."[28] As Union lines advanced farther south, more and more enslaved people seized the chance to escape. This is what Du Bois meant by the "general strike against slavery": a massive, though uncoordinated, rebellion that deprived the Confederacy of its main source of strength.

Like Butler's May 1861 decision to accept runaways at Fort Monroe, other steps toward emancipation were "measures of necessity" given the military setbacks for the Union early in the war. The Union's defeat at the Battle of Bull Run in July was quickly followed by the First Confiscation

Act, which codified Butler's policy of legitimating seizure of "property" being used in service to the Confederacy. A year later the Second Confiscation Act and Militia Act permitted the Union's use of runaways, including as soldiers, and officially freed all who escaped from pro-Confederate slaveholders.[29] Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation came soon thereafter, issued initially in September 1862 as a warning to the Confederacy and in final form on January 1. Since it was "a measure of necessity," it still exempted slaveholders who professed loyalty to the Union. Its declaration of freedom largely codified a preexisting reality that slaves themselves had created. In July Lincoln had warned politicians from the border states that "the mere incidents of the war," the "friction and abrasion" of slave escapes and military operations, were already tending toward emancipation there. Long before January 1863, many of the enslaved had "created and signed their own emancipation proclamations, and seized the time," writes historian Vincent Harding.[30]

Figure 6: Escaped Black people behind Union lines in Cumberland Landing, Virginia, 1862. Photo by James F. Gibson (Library of Congress).

Figure 7: This image shows a wartime school for formerly enslaved children. Photo by Mathew Brady (US National Archives).

The policy changes in Washington followed numerous and lesser-known instances of local conflict in which enslaved people had forced the hand of commanders and soldiers. The policy of excluding runaways from Union camps became less tenable as the Union entered the plantation South, where slaves "entered Union lines in such numbers that it was nearly impossible to keep them out." Black men often forced commanders to allow whole families into the camps by threatening to withhold their own labor if women and children were excluded.[31] These local conflicts were at the root of national-level policy changes, as the correspondence between field commanders and their superiors makes clear.

Runaways confronted Union military personnel with a stark choice: either return them to their brutal captors—the very same people who were forcing Union soldiers to risk their own lives—or offer them refuge. In the South many white soldiers got their "first introduction to slave-life" and were involuntarily "summoned to confront the gravest question of the war," as one Massachusetts soldier wrote in July 1861. Many were disgusted upon witnessing slaveholders' savagery and impressed by the courage of Black runaways. A Wisconsin soldier wrote in 1862 that "soldiers become abolitionists as they go south if they were not before." Enlisted soldiers were usually quicker to embrace antislavery than their commanders and sometimes aided escaped slaves in violation of orders. In a meticulous analysis of soldiers' correspondence, historian Chandra Manning suggests that the Union rank and file were transformed by encounters with enslaved people and then helped activate their officers to take, or at least acquiesce to, antislavery actions. As a result "of overlapping experiences and interactions with slaves, enlisted men changed their ideas and then their behavior, leaving their officers with little choice but to sanction the new behavior with policy shifts." The moral rationale was reinforced by a pragmatic one, since runaways offered "valuable assistance and information" that materially benefited Union troops, as Brigadier General Ormsby Mitchel reported from Alabama. There "the negroes are our only friends, and in two instances I owe my own safety to their faithfulness." Mitchel requested, and received, permission to protect runaways who "furnish information or other assistance."[32]

While individual Union personnel were sometimes moved by morality, governments, as Frederick Douglass knew, are driven by pragmatism. In April 1864 Lincoln said, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." He had reluctantly concluded that "no human power can subdue this rebellion without the use of the emancipation policy." Upon victory in 1865 Lincoln acknowledged that "without the military help of black freedmen, the war against the South could not have been won." Almost 200,000 Black men had fought for the Union and at least as many Black workers had aided Union forces with noncombat labor.[33] Douglass was right about what would move the government to embrace abolition, and right about the impact. Finally, slave resistance also intensified the contradictions within the Confederacy.

Slaveholders' immediate responses to slave flight often backfired. Their resort to harsher repression unwittingly showed the enslaved "the folly of expecting that loyalty to the old regime would be rewarded." As Union forces advanced southward many slaveholders tried to forcibly relocate their slaves farther away, which itself often spurred escapes. Slaveholders also complained that successful escapes led to "the demoralization of the negroes that remain, which increases with the continuance of the evil & may finally result in perfect disorganization and rebellion." The decline of the Confederacy's military and economic fortunes also forced policy changes, such as new taxes, impressment of enslaved workers, and military conscription, that heightened tensions within white southern society. Many slaveholders resented the impressment of their slaves, while many nonslaveholding whites bitterly resented the sacrifices they had to bear in the form of military service and rising prices. Slave resistance and the many changes it catalyzed transformed "the Confederacy's cornerstone into its tombstone."[34]

Essential Conditions and Practical Lessons

Most of the above facts are well established. Unlike in Du Bois's time, most reputable scholars today assign an important role to slave resistance. However, there is still disagreement about its relative importance amid all the variables that contributed to emancipation. Historians still debate "what was the sine qua non of emancipation in the 1860s—the essential condition, the one thing without which it would not have happened."[35] The differences in emphasis are worth parsing since they have implications for movement strategy today.

Some historians emphasize the importance of the Republican Party and electoral politics in driving southern elites to secede. They also observe that news of the election campaigns of 1856 and 1860 gave hope to slaves and may have inspired some acts of resistance. For James McPherson, an eminent historian of the war, the "essential condition" was not slave resistance but rather the war itself, which was precipitated by Lincoln's election on a platform of principled opposition to slavery and then his refusal to recognize the legitimacy of secession. He points out that "without the war there would have been no confiscation act, no Emancipation Proclamation, no Thirteenth Amendment (not to mention the Fourteenth and Fifteenth), certainly no self-emancipation, and almost certainly no end of slavery for several more decades." McPherson also defends Lincoln's wartime decisions. Had he endorsed abolition earlier in the war, he would have alienated whites in both the border states and the North, and additional states may have seceded, just as northern leaders warned at the time. Lincoln was thus wise to proceed cautiously. Furthermore, those who harshly criticize his limitations do not "appreciate the acuity and empathy that enabled Lincoln to transcend his prejudices" by eventually embracing abolition and some measure of racial equality.[36]

McPherson and similar scholars are right that only in 1861 did the context became ripe for immediate, large-scale emancipation. They are right that Lincoln's election and his willingness to counter the southern secession with military force were important factors, though they understate Lincoln's readiness to compromise with slaveholders. And they are probably right that declaring a war for abolition in April 1861 would have upset many northern and border-state whites whose military participation was important to the Union victory.

There are, nonetheless, major problems with this argument. First, McPherson and company "mistake effect for cause."[37] They view Lincoln, the Republican Party, and white support for the Union as root causes of emancipation, when those factors were mostly the products of larger economic, social, and military developments—the effects of mass disruption, not its causes. Lincoln's political ascent and his evolving politics reflected the rising class struggle, namely the dual conflicts between slaves and masters and between northern and southern capital. The barbarity of slaveholders and the resistance of the enslaved is what intensified the latent rifts among capitalists and galvanized the northern abolitionist movement from the 1830s onward. These latter forces, in turn, made it harder for northern politicians to continue accommodating the slaveholders and made the slaveholders more desperate.

Once the war began, northern capitalists who had sought accommodation were forced to choose sides. They opted for the Union despite the immediate risk to their southern business relationships, both because of longstanding complaints about southerners' economic policy and because secession "strikes a death-blow at that confidence in the Government which is the life and soul of commerce," as the *New York Times* observed.[38] Lincoln had to choose sides too. He was correct when he said that "events have controlled me." Though he did not say so explicitly, the key "events" were all traceable to the racialized class struggle swirling around him. McPherson fails to understand this causation. As David Williams notes, "no reputable scholar denies that Lincoln and the Union military played a significant part in the emancipation process. But following their lines of reasoning more deeply, we cannot help but see the efforts of black folk at their core." The "essential condition," notes Williams, was "the unrelenting resistance to slavery among slaves themselves," which in turn drove other political, economic, and military developments. These latter developments in turn inspired additional resistance.[39]

That resistance, and the war it generated, also forced nonelite whites to choose sides. A second problem with McPherson's argument is his claim that radical demands would have alienated most of the white public and that Lincoln's embrace of those demands might thus have hindered emancipation. Although this counterfactual is impossible to disprove, the record of events gives reason for skepticism. For one thing, the abolitionists' alienation of many whites must be weighed against what the Union gained by embracing abolition, as Frederick Douglass argued. Most tangibly, it got over 400,000 Black soldiers and workers, most of whom came from the South and thus deprived the Confederacy of crucial labor. The Emancipation Proclamation also foreclosed any possibility that Britain would recognize the Confederacy.[40]

McPherson also overstates the extent to which abolition alienated whites. Three decades of abolitionist agitation did not stop the election of Lincoln, a candidate incessantly vilified (however unfairly) as an "Abolition bloodhound."[41] Once the South seceded, and as slave resistance intensified further, vacillating whites everywhere were ultimately forced to choose between slavery and abolition. The Union's eventual embrace of abolition rankled some, but it also boosted the morale of many. The

Emancipation Proclamation did not lead to mass defections from the Union cause. Nor did it lead the border states to secede. The poor whites of those states were mostly disinclined to fight for the Confederacy, and most who did had to be conscripted. A leading scholar of secession, William Barney, concludes that "secession was never a real possibility" in the four border states. Not only did business in those states depend more on northern connections than the rest of the South did, but "secession and southern independence meant little to the poorest one-third of whites who owned neither land nor slaves," and who "entered the Confederate army primarily through the forced mechanism of the draft." Furthermore, the border states' commitment to slavery had grown weaker in the late antebellum period, due in part to thousands of annual escapes to the North—another ripple effect of slave resistance.[42]

How we understand these events has implications for social movement strategy today. If the bold visionary Abraham Lincoln was the central motor force in slave emancipation, then presumably today's movements should focus their energies on electing visionary politicians. We should prioritize the "agency of the ballot box," as Republican senator William Seward urged in the 1850s.[43] Once our allies are in office, we should appeal to their "acuity and empathy" so that they might "transcend" whatever "prejudices" prevent them from doing the right thing. If, however, Lincoln was primarily a reflection of historical forces, then perhaps movements will have the most impact on politicians by shaping those forces directly through militant action outside the electoral sphere.

The latter view need not deny the importance of Lincoln or electoral politics. The breakdown of the traditional Whig and Democratic party coalitions in the 1850s facilitated the rise of Lincoln and the Republicans. Congressional politicians like Charles Sumner and Joshua Giddings gave abolitionist demands greater influence in Washington, for example by fiercely resisting the proslavery Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which "planted the seeds of a northern electoral rebellion against slavery," writes Manisha Sinha. Some abolitionists did prioritize electoral work. Even those most opposed to an electoral strategy, William Lloyd Garrison and his camp, supported some antislavery politicians and petition campaigns.[44]

Still, the most essential abolitionist activity occurred outside the realm of elections and lobbying. Enslaved people fled their captors and at times rose up in violent rebellion. Northern abolitionists sheltered them and resisted the Fugitive Slave Act through all means at their disposal. The resulting confrontations intensified the "popular revulsion against fugitive rendition in the North," which "grew with each minibattle," and fanned the rage of southern slaveholders.[45] Explosive acts of confrontation like the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry galvanized mass sentiment in a way that electoral canvassing could not. "I find the hatred of slavery greatly intensified by the fate of [John] Brown," reported Joshua Giddings after the raid. "Men are ready to march to Virginia and depose of her despotism at once." These nonelectoral disruptions spilled over into the electoral realm. They fueled the Republicans' rising popularity in the 1850s and ensured that slavery was front and center in the national political debate. Republican candidates' rhetorical attacks on slavery in the late 1850s were not intended "to shape northern public opinion," but rather to placate "the manifest political appetite of northern voters."[46]

The practical question was one of priority: given their locations in society and their finite energies, how could abolitionists most effectively intervene? Most had no power to directly influence Lincoln, Congress, or party leaders. Electoral developments mattered, but abolitionists did not automatically conclude that election campaigns should be the focus of their day-to-day organizing and agitation. Often it was the abolitionists who were legally disenfranchised—slaves, free northern Blacks, and women—who most emphasized the nonelectoral work of direct disruption, escape, sanctuary, and agitation of the northern masses in order "to move the political center to the left."[47] They focused on the realms where their actions could make the most difference: the plantations, the communities that harbored escaped slaves, the church congregations, the courts, the battlefields of war. Actions in those realms had cascading impacts, including on elections.

Implications for the Climate Movement

The most relevant lesson of slave emancipation for the climate movement concerns the role of a disruptive minority in catalyzing rapid changes. US abolition shows how a minority acting upon its own moral and material interests can accelerate the decline of a parasitic elite sector, by forcing that sector into confrontation with other elite sectors. The latter can be converted into a counterelite, abandoning their plans for the sector's "ultimate extinction" (Lincoln) and instead hastening its extinction as "a measure of necessity" (Butler). This activation of counterelites was mediated in many local instances by lower- and middle-level actors in society, notably northern abolitionists and later the white Union soldiers who abetted slave resistance during the war. The initiating minority were the rebellious slaves, themselves a minority of the enslaved population, who catalyzed decisive shifts among other minorities.

Fortunately, the success of today's climate movement does not require the same level of courage and sacrifice that the enslaved rebels or Union soldiers displayed. However, the demise of fossil fuels will likewise be initiated by the actions of a minority. A disruptive minority, or multiple different minorities, will undermine the industry at multiple locations. Some of those disrupters will use overt confrontation. Others will use institutional means such as litigation or quiet disinvestment. Once that process reaches a certain threshold, other sectors, including investors with no moral qualms about fossil fuels, will jump the fossil fuel ship for self-interested reasons.[48] Election outcomes will play an important role in accelerating or delaying this process, as in the elections of 1856 and 1860, but nonelectoral action will be more decisive and more within the average person's ability to influence.

Some readers will doubt the comparability of these two cases. The differences between the 1850s and 2020s are huge and obvious. There is no chattel slavery, most of the US population has formal legal equality and suffrage rights, the US economy looks vastly different, and so on. Yet there are also many parallels. For one, the rhetorical patterns of slaveholders and the fossil fuel industry are similar. Like the enslavers who argued that their cotton helped "the poor to obtain cheap and becoming clothing," fossil fuel elites tout the benefits of their products for consumers and workers. Like those who acknowledged imperfections in the slave system but warned that change would only "increase all the evils of which we complain," Big Oil pays lip service to "net zero" but warns of mass unemployment and consumer suffering if politicians do anything to promote decarbonization. Just as slaveholders labeled the antislavery crowd "rabid and fanatical," anyone who echoes the policy recommendations of climate scientists is a "radical extremist" peddling a "woke" agenda on behalf of "special interests." The rhetoric of victimhood is central in both cases. Where slaveholders cried out for "equal opportunity" in the western territories, polluters accuse government of "discrimination" and of "picking winners and losers" at the slightest attenuation of their freedom to harm others. Those who aim to restrict fossil fuels are "intolerant of diversity."[49] It would be easy to disregard slaveholders' sociopathic entitlement if a parallel mentality were not so common among today's parasites.

The multipronged political strategy of fossil fuel companies also recalls that of slaveholders before 1861. One prong is to populate the three branches with their own people, who subsidize the parasitic sector in numerous ways while obstructing the growth of competing sectors. Just as the doctrine of "frugal spending" was invoked to block the growth of industrial constituencies that might erode slaveholders' political power, it is today weaponized to block government investment in renewables.[50] The other component of political strategy exploits the parasitic sectors' control over private investment. Whenever their personnel in government need help from outside, the threat of disinvestment—no more cheap cotton clothing, no more cheap fuel—is wielded to coerce government, other capitalists, and the public back into compliance.

This behavior generates frustration among the coerced, yet does not produce decisive action by counterelites. Other ruling-class interests are of two minds, at once harmed by the parasitic sector and benefiting from it in the short term. They might desire the "ultimate extinction" of the parasite, but they are content to let it survive long into the future and are wary of any "immediatist" agenda. Though chattel slavery was probably unsustainable in the long run, it was still very profitable in 1860 and it might have endured for many more decades if slaveholders were left to their own devices.[51] Similarly, most capitalists know fossil fuels must be phased out but are not taking concerted action to accelerate that process. The Janus-faced policy of the Union in 1861–62, with its "two tendencies" of supporting slaveholders and acquiescing to slave escapes, parallels the capitalist class's ambivalence toward fossil fuels.[52]

The need for coercion also reflects the precariousness of the parasite's position, however. Slaveholders decried "the systematic aggressions of the north" because they were, in fact, besieged by their own enslaved population and the political shifts that slave resistance had catalyzed. Slavery was particularly precarious because, contrary to the slaveholders' claims, it was not indispensable to the US economy by 1860. By 2020 fossil fuels were likewise expendable given the technological advances in renewable energy sources, especially if governments were willing to stop subsidizing fossil fuels and instead support renewables. When parasitic industries cease to be indispensable they lash out in desperate and violent attempts to prolong their profitability.

This analogy raises the question of how much damage the fossil fuel industry will do on its way out. The fact that slavery was abolished only after a horrible war may raise doubts about the usefulness of this case for the climate movement. Will the industry launch another civil war, backed by legions of fascist foot soldiers pledging allegiance to Trump or some similar savior? Its support for Republicans signals that it has embraced deeply antidemocratic means, including paramilitary violence, to hold onto its privileges. On a more optimistic note, there are some reasons why decarbonization is easier to imagine than peaceful abolition was in 1860. Slave prices hit a historic high that year, giving slaveholders more incentive to resist abolition. The enslaved US population was valued at $3 billion, which was "significantly more than the total capital invested, at the time, in manufacturing and railroads combined."[53] The fossil fuel industry's tentacles may extend everywhere, but the value of fossil fuel capital is much lower as a proportion of the total economy, and growing numbers of investors are distancing themselves from the sector. Moreover, the US and global economies are far richer today, meaning we have the financial resources to smoothly transition away from fossil fuels without causing large-scale economic dislocations.

That is reason for hope. Seven months into the Civil War, Frederick Douglass assessed the recent shifts that the enslaved and their comrades had produced. Though fiercely critical of the Union leaders, he noted that necessity was pushing them in the direction of emancipation, "and that is something." His advice to his audience was a stonecutter metaphor: "Keep pounding on the rock."[54]

Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 16–17; William L. Barney, *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 306 (Butler quoted); latter quotes from Brigadier General William S. Harney to Thomas F. Gantt, May 14, 1861, in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, series 1, vol. 1: *The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 413–14.

Butler to Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, May 27, 1861, in Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 71; "Slaves Contraband of War," *New York Times*, May 27, 1861.

The classic analysis of Reconstruction and its rollback is W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Among other fine studies see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Perennial, 2002); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London: Verso, 2014).

Quoted in John Clegg and Duncan Foley, "A Classical-Marxian Model of Antebellum Slavery," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 43, no. 1 (2019): 119.

Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 55–83 (quote, 57). See also Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*; Hahn, *Nation*; John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*; David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). For abolition elsewhere see for example Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988); Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Celso Thomas Castilho, *Slave Emancipation and Transformations in Brazilian Political Citizenship* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

Quote in Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 142. For critiques of the Lincolncentric orthodoxy see Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*, 5–11; Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 10–17. Du Bois's own indictment of "the propaganda of history" remains relevant today; see *Black Reconstruction*, 711–29.

Southern slaveholders were capitalist in that their market dependence forced them to maximize return on investment; what set them apart from other capitalists was their choice of chattel slavery as the means to do so. Ultimately that choice imperiled their sustainability since the growth of the enslaved population coupled with territorial confinement threatened to reduce the economic value of their investment in slaves, as measured in prices. Fear of falling slave prices led many slaveholders to oppose the reopening of the slave trade, even after secession, and to argue that slavery must either expand into new territories or wither away. The perceived need to "expand or die" was a key motivator behind secession, and recent statistical modeling concludes that the fear was not unfounded. See Clegg and Foley, "Classical Marxian Model."

On the origin of this concept see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 73–102.

William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," in *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 85, 92, 128–29. The last two quotes are from, respectively, Thomas Roderick Dew, "Abolition of Negro Slavery" (1832), in Faust, *Ideology*, 27; and the *Newberry Rising Sun*, August 1, 1860, quoted in Barney, *Rebels*, 114.

Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

E.g., Ralph V. Anderson and Robert E. Gellman, "Slaves as Fixed Capital: Slave Labor and Southern Economic Development," *Journal of American History* 64, no. 1 (1977): 24–46; Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1978). By contrast, some recent historians have argued that slavery was just as essential to capitalist growth as the slaveholders claimed, though their research lacks the quantitative rigor of the earlier studies. For review and critique of the latter school see John J. Clegg, "Capitalism and Slavery," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 281–304; John Clegg, "How Slavery Shaped American Capitalism," *Jacobin*, August 28, 2019.

Gavin Wright, "Slavery and Anglo-American Capitalism Revisited," *Economic History Review* 73, no. 2 (2020): 353–83.

Wright, "Slavery," 355.

John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 282.

Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 381–93, 400 (quote), 567.

By clearing the way for slavery's expansion, the ruling deterred free migration, with major ripple effects. As one historian notes, "The downward spiral in stock prices for western railroads led to heightened risk in capital markets and ultimately financial panic." Jenny B. Wahl, "Stay East, Young Man: Market Repercussions of the Dred Scott Decision," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 82, no. 1 (2007): 390.

Robert H. Churchill, "When the Slave Catchers Came to Town: Cultures of Violence along the Underground Railroad," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (2018): 530; Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 571–72.

Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 195–227, 381–460; Jesse Olsavsky, *The Most Absolute Abolition: Runaways, Vigilance Committees, and the Rise of Revolutionary Abolitionism, 1835–1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2022).

Barney, *Rebels*, 94–100, 132–35.

Quotes in Barney, *Rebels*, 8, 109, 286, 310. "Equal opportunity" is Barney's paraphrase of slaveholder arguments; the rest are direct quotations. Portrayals of abolitionists as "fanatical" and "extreme" long outlived the Civil War, as Howard Zinn noted a century later. See "Abolitionists and the Tactics of Agitation," in *The Politics of History*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 137–52.

Clegg and Foley, "Classical-Marxian Model."

Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 15. This explanation for secession was clearly understood by Confederates and has been confirmed again by recent studies. See Ashworth, *Slavery*; Barney, *Rebels*; Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

Jarvis, interviewed in 1872, in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 608. In transcribing Jarvis's speech, the white interviewers used spelling and punctuation intended to signal inferiority, so I have standardized the words.

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492–Present*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 183, 186 (Lincoln quotes from 1837, 1862); Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 104–05, 110–13; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 146 (Lincoln quote from 1858), 150; "Another Interview with Mr. Lincoln: His Opinion of Compromises," *New York Times*, January 14, 1861.

Frederick Douglass, "The Real Peril of the Republic" (October 1861), in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International, 1952), 3:164; Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 251 (Halleck quoted); Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 22–23, 27–28, 39.

Thomas H. Hicks to Secretary of War Simon Cameron, November 18, 1861, in Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 353; Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 146 (Lincoln quote, 1858, on whites' opposition to racial equality); "Slave Insurrections," *New York Times*, April 12, 1861. Northern capitalists did not push for immediate abolition either. As Du Bois wrote of their position in the postwar period, "They did not want to set an example of confiscation before a nation victimized by monopoly; and they were bitterly opposed to giving capital to workers or redistributing wealth by public taxation" (*Black Reconstruction*, 368).

"How to End the War" (May 1861), 94; "Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand" (September 1861), 151–54; "Cast Off the Mill-Stone" (September 1861), 155; "To Rev. Samuel J. May" (August 30, 1861), 159; "Signs of the Times" (November 1861), 171; all in Foner, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* vol. 3.

"Stampede of Slaves from Maryland," *New York Times*, April 27, 1861; Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 61; "Appeal for the Freed Men in Virginia," *New York Times*, December 11, 1861; Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 5 (Gen. John Logan quoted).

Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 21, 40–41.

Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 40 (Lincoln quoted); Harding, *There Is a River*, 226.

Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 36 (quote), 45.

Letter reprinted in “The Contraband at Fortress Monroe,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1861; Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*, 87 (William Ball quoted, 1862); Manning, *Cruel War*, 46–51, 246n136 (quote); Brigadier General Ormsby Mitchel to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, May 4, 1862, and Stanton’s reply of May 5, in Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 275–76; second Mitchel quote is from another letter on May 4, Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 276n.

Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 4 (1st quote); Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 100 (2nd quote), 716 (3rd quote). Figures on Union service in Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 203, 206; James M. McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 143.

Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 13 (1st quote), 54–59, 70 (3rd quote); R.Q. Mallard, et al., to Brigadier General Hugh Mercer, August 1, 1862, in Berlin, et al., *Destruction of Slavery*, 795 (2nd quote). On white dissent in the Confederacy see David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War* (New York: New Press, 2008).

James M. McPherson, “Who Freed the Slaves?” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 1 (1995): 3.

McPherson, “Who Freed the Slaves?” 3; James M. McPherson, “Lincoln the Devil,” *New York Times Book Review*, August 27, 2000. See also James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York: Norton, 2012); Matt Karp, “The Mass Politics of Antislavery,” *Catalyst* 3, no. 2 (2019): 131–78.

The phrase is from Errico Malatesta. See introduction.

“Abolition and Coercion,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1861.

Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 15–16.

British recognition may have been unlikely anyway, but the Emancipation Proclamation sealed the deal. See Philip E. Myers, *Caution and Cooperation: The American Civil War in British-American Relations* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2008), 124–26.

This and other epithets were quoted by the *New York Times* at the start of the war; see “Abolition and Coercion.”

Barney, *Rebels*, 316. For the impacts of slave escapes in the border states see William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25–32. Some 200,000 border state whites (plus 100,000 Confederate state whites) fought for the Union; Freehling, *South*, xiii.

Quoted in Karp, “Mass Politics of Antislavery,” 137.

Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 259, 465, 486, 496 (quote). On Black men’s electoral engagement in the antebellum North see Van Gosse, *The First Reconstruction: Black Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 500. Several recent studies examine the impact of resistance to the 1850 act. See R.J.M. Blackett, *The Captive’s Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Olsavsky, *Most Absolute Abolition*.

Giddings quoted in Karp, “Mass Politics of Antislavery,” 173–74; last two quotes are Karp’s (151). Karp nonetheless centers Republican politicians and elections; the enslaved scarcely appear in his account and play no major causal role. As one example of how nonelectoral work can have salutary indirect impacts on elections, abolitionist lecturers from the Garrisonian camp helped boost voter support for the Liberty Party in the 1840s; see Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 464. Sinha suggests that all abolitionist strategies had electoral impact: “partisan politics proved to be uncongenial to abolitionism pure and simple,” yet “abolitionists of all factions did influence northern politics.”

For support for the Garrisonians among abolitionist women and free Black men see Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 262–64 (quote, 465). Eric Foner's assertion that "the movement turned almost entirely to political action [i.e., electoral action] in the 1840's and 1850's" is misleading, especially if we define abolitionists as all who worked toward immediate emancipation; *Free Soil*, 73. For example, Sinha's discussion of responses to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act makes clear that "much of the abolitionist opposition to it was on-the-ground resistance"; *Slave's Cause*, 500–42 (quote, 505). Furthermore, even governments in northern states with no Black suffrage at this time (e.g., Pennsylvania) engaged in noncompliance with the act, suggesting that Black electoral mobilization was not a prerequisite.

See chap. 2.

Tracey M. Roberts, "Picking Winners and Losers: A Structural Examination of Tax Subsidies to the Energy Industry," *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* 41, no. 1 (2019): 63–138; David Gelles, "G.O.P. Treasurers Work to Thwart Climate Actions," *New York Times*, August 6, 2022 ("woke," "radical extremist"); Myles McCormick, "Joe Manchin Pulls Divisive Permitting Proposals from US Spending Bill," *Financial Times* online, September 27, 2022 ("special interests"); Andy Barr (chairman of the House Financial Services Subcommittee on Financial Institutions and Monetary Policy) in James Politi, "Republicans Vow to Probe US Banks and Asset Managers' 'ESG Agenda' in Congress," *Financial Times* online, January 28, 2023 ("intolerant"). On "discrimination" see chap. 2. Other quotes are from preceding sections of this chapter.

Barney, *Rebels*, 260.

Late-antebellum estimates of its potential longevity ranged from 25 to 200 years. Lincoln's own appraisal before the war was 100, and even in 1862 he proposed a time-line for compensated emancipation that would only bring full abolition by 1900. Recent estimates vary widely and are largely contingent on whether slavery would have been allowed to expand into new territory. See Clegg and Foley, "Classical-Marxian Model," 119, 122; Stanley L. Engerman, "The South's Economic Flexibility and the Malthusian Model Suggest Slavery Would Have Continued for Decades," *Southern Cultures* 19, no. 2 (2013): 82–83.

Berlin, et al., *Slaves No More*, 27.

Clegg and Foley, "Classical-Marxian Model," 128n48, citing data from James L. Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 28.

Douglass, "Signs of the Times," 173.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Behaving as Though Management Is the Enemy"

Workers Defeat the Auto Industry

IN THE 1920S EMPLOYERS' CHOKEHOLD SEEMED SECURE. A HISTORIC UPSURGE OF working-class organizing and strikes had been crushed in the aftermath of World War I, when capital and state joined hands to imprison, deport, and terrorize workers back into submission. Between 1920 and 1930 the percentage of unionized workers in the United States dropped by almost half, to less than 10 percent. The mass production industries—automobiles, rubber, steel, electrical manufacturing, and so on—were almost entirely union-free.[1]

Then, starting in the early 1930s, the employers saw their grip falter. The threat was not strictly about wages. Particularly worrisome was workers' demand for more control over their own labor. From 1933 onward the titans of US capitalism, like General Motors vice president Donaldson Brown, warned incessantly of the threat to the natural order. They were being deprived of "their rightful places of leadership." Aggressive union organizers sought to "disrupt the normal and essential processes of managerial control," challenging capitalists' "absolute jurisdiction over labor." Many union activists were Communists or other radicals with "revolutionary ideas" that rejected capitalist hierarchy altogether. By the mid-1930s the radicals enjoyed growing support among the working class. As Brown complained to his business colleagues, "we witness unions and union leadership behaving as though management and labor were natural and inevitable enemies." There was a real danger that "the people will lose their last faith in industrial leadership.”[2] In response, GM and other major employers fought against unions with every legal or illegal means at their disposal, and particularly against the leftists.

Yet by the early 1940s, all the big auto companies—GM, Chrysler, even the violent Nazi sympathizer Henry Ford—had been forced to accept the unionization of their factories. They concluded that “enlightened self-interest” required them to acquiesce. In 1943 Brown told business colleagues that “I can hardly conceive of the abandonment of collective bargaining in American industry.”[3] And as went the Big Three, so went the rest of major industry. Employers across the country consented to unionization. They accepted the legitimacy of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, or “Wagner Act”), which almost all had initially opposed, and the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that it established. The new law protected private sector workers’ right to organize by prohibiting many of employers’ intimidation tactics and by establishing exclusive representation in collective bargaining, which hindered employers’ ability to divide the workforce. This did not stop capitalists from trying to limit unions’ power. Still, their acceptance of independent unions and the principle of exclusive representation marked a major about-face.

The Wagner Act was one key piece of the New Deal, which also included the 1935 Social Security Act, the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, various jobs programs, and a host of other important changes to fiscal, monetary, and regulatory policy. Today these reforms have attracted much interest among proponents of the Green New Deal. Many draw cautionary lessons, pointing to the New Deal’s deep flaws. At the behest of employers the major labor and social legislation excluded agricultural and domestic workers—sectors that included the majority of Black workers—and it did not force racial desegregation upon employers in either the North or the South.[4] This history informs many climate organizers’ insistence on racial equity in the Green New Deal. The act also sought to tame radical working-class demands by diverting shop-floor militancy into the institutional bureaucracy of the NLRB. Furthermore, all progress would soon be undermined by a ferocious corporate counteroffensive.[5] These outcomes have informed the Left’s insistence on using reform struggles as a way of strengthening rather than demobilizing a movement.

On the more positive side, the decade from 1935 to 1945 proves that major changes to US capitalism are feasible in a very short time. New Deal reforms represented important defeats for leading sectors of capital. They incurred capitalists’ wrath because they threatened their “absolute jurisdiction” over the workplace, the market, and the society. Capitalists’ “rightful place of leadership” in all spheres of life was suddenly in doubt. World War II offers a further example of rapid and dramatic changes. Wartime economic conversion, in which the US state assumed a commanding role over the auto industry and mass production more generally, shows that economic and technological barriers can be overcome in short order when the political will exists.[6]

How was it possible? The mainstream explanation focuses on President Franklin D. Roosevelt, his appointees, and liberal politicians in Congress. It stresses “the autonomous initiatives of politicians” and government advisers, including “the persistent determination of Senator Wagner” and “of congressional liberals in general.” It also stresses the refusal of liberal politicians to use federal and state security forces to repress worker activism. It recognizes some role for popular agency, but with emphasis on the electoral mobilization and voting that elevated liberals to office. Election campaigns and ensuing legislation then “inspired” workplace union organizing and other activism. This interpretation of the New Deal has helped shape the strategies of the climate movement.[7]

The mainstream view gets it backwards. Far from being “autonomous,” Wagner, Roosevelt, and colleagues were mostly reflections of their circumstances. Some capitalists of the time recognized as much. In November 1937, *Fortune* magazine argued that liberal politicians who aided labor were responding to larger economic and social developments. The “assistance rendered by the government” to workers “is itself symptomatic of a real pressure, for the machinery of Washington, unpredictable as its motion may be, does not operate in a vacuum of pure idealism. Washington has strengthened labor’s position, not just for the hell of it, but in response to forces that the depression stimulated and revitalized." *Fortune*'s view was not too different from what the anarchist Errico Malatesta had argued in 1899, that to see elections and politicians as determining a social movement's fortunes was to "mistake effect for cause" and to "stop at the first appearance of things," for it missed all the ways that movements shaped elections and politicians, even without engaging in electoral campaigns.[8]

Though *Fortune* did not specify precisely which "forces" were acting upon the US government, they were plain to see. One was the Depression itself, a deep economic crisis generated by the capitalist marketplace and prolonged by capitalists' opposition to progressive government action. Between 1929 and 1935 capitalists themselves controlled most aspects of the government's response, and they failed abysmally to restore economic stability. The landmark legislation of Roosevelt's first year, the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), left capitalists in the driver's seat. By 1935 the program was a manifest failure, leading even many capitalists to advocate stronger government intervention to stabilize the economy.

The second force influencing the government was the title of the 1937 *Fortune* article: "The Industrial War." Class conflict had escalated dramatically in recent years. Between 1933 and 1937 there were over ten thousand strikes involving 5.6 million workers.[9] As employers' profits recovered—and in many cases soared to record levels, as in the auto industry—workers demanded the right to unionize. Employers responded as they had historically, by firing workers who joined independent unions. Now, however, that response failed to beat workers back into submission. This clash of forces necessitated a response from politicians, and the old ruling-class formula wouldn't cut it. By 1935 it was clear that repression and free rein for capital would not resolve the crisis and might further radicalize the working class. The need for a solution to the prolonged depression and to the disruption of production, plus the evident failure of other approaches, led to the Wagner Act's passage.

Working-class activism was most effective when it caused direct disruption, especially on the industrial shop floors but also in commercial establishments, transportation nodes, public spaces, and the houses, apartment buildings, and farms where indebted people were targeted with eviction. The most effective unionists of the 1930s were not focused on electoral outcomes or on winning the sympathy of the broad US public. Those factors were not trivial, but they were only marginally within activists' ability to control. During the Great Sit-Down Strike in GM plants in early 1937, most of the US public sympathized more with GM than with the strikers, and even said that government should use violence to evict the strikers. A decade later, most people supported the government's repression of Communists, who were some of the most effective organizers of the 1930s and 1940s.[10] These poll results were partly an achievement of capitalist propaganda; the press was overwhelmingly hostile to workers.[11] Most of the public also had little familiarity with the life of the assembly-line worker and was not directly impacted by conditions in the factories. For these reasons progressive organizers knew that they could not rely upon majority sentiment, and that winning basic rights required militant action by an organized minority of the population. Organizing that minority to take disruptive collective action is where most shop-floor organizers focused their energies.

This alternate reading of the New Deal holds lessons for the climate movement. It demonstrates the importance of nonelectoral, disruptive action initiated by a minority. It also suggests that a victory over a particular company or lower level of government can lead to impacts at other levels, as people elsewhere seek to imitate the victory and the defeated elites try to impose uniform standards on their competitors. Though my discussion of the New Deal focuses primarily on labor activism, these two takeaways might be applied by both labor and nonlabor organizations in today's climate movement.

Capitalists and Unionization before 1933

Not all US capitalists in the pre-Depression era were entirely opposed to unions. The National Civic Federation, formed in 1900, brought together corporate leaders who thought unions might play a constructive role in the advance of capitalism. The immediate motivation was the threat of rising class consciousness and militancy among workers, so apparent in the mass strikes and confrontations of 1877, 1886, 1894, and most recently 1897–1903. Federation leaders sought to ensure steady production and to fracture class solidarity by encouraging union rights for skilled "craft" workers, on the condition that they cooperated with bosses and turned their backs on lower strata of the working class. At the turn of the century a spike in sympathy strikes among skilled workers (where workers in one place struck in solidarity with workers elsewhere) reminded employers of the need for a new formula. Stable and procapitalist craft unions that delivered some benefits to their members might be preferable to endemic disruption and the possibility of an angry and united working class.[12]

The other reason some employers began to look favorably on unionization was the chaotic atmosphere of competition. Market competition, that heralded ideal of capitalist ideologues, was a scourge of capitalists in the real world. US businesses often lowered prices to outcompete their rivals or overproduced to exploit market demand; when the rivals responded in kind, all suffered. As General Motors economist Steven DuBrul wrote in 1934, "The only people who seem to believe in competition" were "that small minority in each industry who gain thereby, and the academic economists.… Most of us do not like competition and attempt to set up monopolistic controls which will make life easier for us." By the 1920s corporate leaders were groping desperately for ways to limit competitive pressures. Unionization of entire industries was one possible way to standardize wages and therefore costs. DuBrul commented that this motive was at "the heart of the union organization plan" that the railroad industry had recently embraced. Another US industrialist told the Senate in 1931 that "nationally organized labor" was necessary for the "stabilization of industrial activity." A coal executive said he "would rather deal with the United Mine Workers than with these ruthless price-cutting, wage-cutting operators who are a detriment to the industry."[13]

Yet proponents of this view were always a minority among large US employers prior to the mid-1930s. The National Civic Federation position was defeated by the antiunion, "open-shop" majority. After World War I most employers confronted with worker agitation opted for repression: firing union members, obtaining court injunctions against strikes and boycotts, and using spies, strikebreakers, police, and armed vigilantes. Sometimes they also offered small benefits to their workers to ward off unionization (known as “welfare capitalism”), or they set up “company” unions controlled by their lackeys. Employers in auto and other mass-production industries were especially disinclined to accept independent unionization. General Motors and its top shareholder, Du Pont, were active within the National Association of Manufacturers, known for its ruthlessly antiunion position.[14]

Another potential benefit of unionization was that more money for workers meant more consumer demand and thus more sales. “Underconsumption,” caused by high levels of inequality, was increasingly recognized as a source of economic instability in the years before 1933. However, individual employers knew that raising wages in their own businesses would do little to raise aggregate demand across the economy, meaning it would likely reduce profits. Thus, as historian Colin Gordon observes, “While many agreed that consumers should have more cash in their pockets, few were willing to extend this reasoning to bargaining with their own workers.”[15]

Most employers on the eve of the Depression remained antiunion. If there was a certain rationality that could lead employers to favor unions, other considerations pulled them strongly in the opposite direction. Control was the ultimate priority. A fear of losing “absolute jurisdiction over labor,” in the words of GM’s Donaldson Brown, tended to outweigh the potential benefits of unionization. “Even in situations where unionization might rationalize competition among firms, its costs on the shop floor seemed too high,” writes Gordon of the mass-production industries. “For these reasons, such firms brutally resisted unionization.”[16]

Not for the first time in history, nor the last, capitalists resisted a “rational” reform that could ultimately help stabilize their own profits. Meanwhile, the state showed little will or power to impose that reform against their wishes. This situation prevailed for the first twenty-eight months of the Roosevelt administration before the Wagner Act became law. Even then, enforcement was minimal for two more years. Workers’ rebellion is essential for understanding how and why unionization rights finally became a reality.

Closing the Gates of Hell

"The bankers and industrialists who have been running our country have proved their utter inability, or indifference, to put the country in a better condition," wrote an unemployed worker facing eviction in 1933.[17] It was a pervasive sentiment. As the Hoover administration (1929–33) waited for the market to magically correct itself, unemployment skyrocketed to 25 percent of the US population, unleashing widespread misery. Hungry people protested and also took direct measures to survive. Tenants in the cities and farmers in rural areas organized in large numbers to physically obstruct eviction attempts, they requisitioned food from large grocery stores, and they organized mutual aid groups to pool their resources. By 1932 national protest reached new proportions, notably in the Bonus Army of war veterans who occupied Washington to demand pension payments and in the Hunger March of thousands who confronted Henry Ford at his River Rouge plant in search of jobs. Both protests were suppressed through state violence. President Hoover sent MacArthur, Patton, and Eisenhower to evict the Bonus Army, with three protesters killed. Henry Ford, who in 1931 blamed poverty on people's unwillingness to work ("There is plenty of work to do if people would do it"), deployed police who murdered four marchers.[18]

Repression did not eliminate resistance, though. To maintain some semblance of social peace, politicians in many cities and states were forced to limit evictions and increase public assistance. Particularly consequential were the organizations of the unemployed that included several hundred thousand members by 1932. Journalist Charles Walker reported on the Unemployed Councils that year:

> In the cities I visited the economic status of the unemployed worker, amount of relief, etc., was directly proportional to the strength and the struggle of the Unemployed Council. In Youngstown, Ohio, where the council was weak and scattered, soup lines generally provided one meal a day and the other relief was $1.50 per week per family. In Indiana Harbor, where the Council was strong, relief was $4 to $5 a week, and graded upward according to the size of the family. Life in any flop-house [i.e., low-cost shelter] is deadly enough, but it is decent

> and tolerable in Chicago compared with the cities where no fight has been made for humane conditions by the Unemployed Councils.

The councils organized protests against evictions, utility shutoffs, racist discrimination, and miserly relief policies in general. They also provided direct help to the unemployed in the form of legal aid and the distribution of clothing and shoes.[19]

Collective action among employed workers also began to intensify. Coal miners were among the first, carrying out numerous strikes and organizing local unions between 1929 and June 1933, when the NIRA passed. Autoworkers soon followed with a series of strikes and walkouts in early 1933. When the economy showed signs of recovery (however illusory) in early 1933, "hell began to pop," as radical organizer A.J. Muste recounted. "Strike followed strike with bewildering rapidity." Contrary to most accounts of New Deal labor reforms, this upsurge of militancy began prior to the passage of the NIRA. The act's Section 7(a) included a nominal guarantee of unionization rights, which is often said to have "inspired" the worker militancy of the mid-1930s. Yet the basic chronology shows that the upsurge in labor organizing and militancy began well before 7(a) existed. The law's impact has been greatly exaggerated.[20]

Most of the agitation of the early 1930s was spearheaded by dedicated radical organizers, especially Communists, who were rooted in the communities, factories, and mines they were organizing. The Communist-led National Miners Union organized much of the disruption in the coal mines. The Ford Hunger March and many of the strikes in mass production industries were likewise organized by Communists, Socialists, and other radicals. As Walker reported on the struggle of the unemployed, "it is no secret that Communists organize Unemployed Councils in most cities and usually lead them, but the councils are organized democratically and the majority rules."[21] The councils were mass organizations, with no ideological requirements for membership. Although self-identified anticapitalists were a minority in most branches, the councils' growing numbers and militancy signaled a clear leftward shift among the working-class population, which was ever more convinced that capitalists and the Republican Party were unwilling or unable "to put the country in a better condition." Signs of rising cooperation across racial lines were also worrisome to the ownership class. Many, though certainly not all, of these radical-led struggles were interracial in nature and sometimes explicitly antiracist. When they were, they tended to benefit whites as well as workers of color, to the detriment of capital.[22]

Figure 8: A 1937 meeting of unemployed miners in Scott's Run, West Virginia. The members were affiliated with the Workers Alliance of America, which grew out of earlier anticapitalist organizing. Much of the radical-led organizing of the 1930s was consciously interracial. Photo by Lewis Hine (public domain).

The radicals forced shifts in the behavior of government, business, and more conservative union leaders. As Walker's account suggests, the Unemployed Councils won modest public relief measures in locales around the country, a point conceded by anticommunist writers. Some in Congress sought federal funds for the unemployed after Communists started organizing in their districts.[23] Radical-led organizing drives and strikes among workers compelled leaders like John L. Lewis of the United Mine

Workers (UMW) to devote more resources to organizing. Agitation among coal miners by the National Miners Union contributed to the revival of the UMW. In February 1933 Lewis begged Congress for legislation “to foster collective bargaining as a means of combating Communism.”[24] The activity of the radicals also gave employers and government more incentive to recognize nonradical unions, thus lending leaders like Lewis more political influence than they would have had otherwise. Without that threat from the Left it is questionable whether Section 7(a) would even have been included in the NIRA.

This context of mass agitation and sharpened class consciousness is essential for understanding the November 1932 election results, which brought a landslide victory for Roosevelt and Democratic candidates for Congress. As a candidate Roosevelt had advocated continued austerity and said nothing about collective bargaining rights. For more than two years after his inauguration his administration hardly “lifted a finger” in support of workers’ right to unionize.[25] Nevertheless, working-class outrage at Hoover and Roosevelt’s vague promise of a “new deal” brought him broad support in 1932, even without labor unions taking any active role in the campaign. In the years that followed, the actions of all three branches of government would be driven in large measure by fears that popular agitation would escalate and that radical critiques of capitalism would become more appealing to the population. For liberal and moderate politicians, social-democratic reforms like the Wagner Act were driven by a “desire to obviate revolution” and “to save capital,” as Roosevelt said in 1938.[26]

The other outstanding fact at the time of Roosevelt’s inauguration was the obvious failure of capitalists to resolve the situation. “Industry is unable to solve its own problems,” remarked the executive of a clock manufacturing company in 1931.[27] The chaotic and ruinous competition of the 1920s continued in the early 1930s, demanding a stronger response from Washington. By March 1933 working people’s perception that “the bankers and industrialists” were unable “to put the country in a better condition” was shared by increasing numbers of bankers and industrialists themselves. Of course, their preferred solution was quite different from what most workers wanted.

The first two years of Roosevelt's presidency involved a series of experiments to stabilize profits and restore employment without upsetting the bankers and industrialists. The latter continued groping for minor adjustments that could restore their profits and assure, as Donaldson Brown said, "absolute jurisdiction" over their workers. Employers interpreted the NIRA's Section 7(a) in their own way, as giving permission for company unions, hundreds of which were soon established. If they permitted independent unions at all, bosses usually rejected exclusive representation rights and insisted on "proportional representation." Ostensibly a way to guarantee "the rights of minorities" within the workforce, proportional representation was in fact a way to undermine independent unions: as GM privately admitted, it was "simply virtuous camouflage [for] the principle of 'divide and rule.'" The proworker language in 7(a) was unenforceable and thus ignored by most employers. The new law did stimulate some unionization efforts, though hundreds of local unions set up under the American Federation of Labor (AFL) soon disbanded due to workers' disillusionment. The increase of strikes and lost workdays, which quadrupled between early and late 1933, led Roosevelt to create a National Labor Board (NLB) in August for fear that strikes "would impede the recovery of business." That body also failed, due to employer intransigence that "brought the agency to its knees." In March 1934 Roosevelt himself further undermined the NLB when he reached an agreement with the auto industry that gave his blessing to company unions and proportional representation—an outcome that left GM's Donaldson Brown "tremendously happy."[28]

Just as problematic, the NIRA also failed to stabilize competition among business. The law aimed to establish industry-specific codes that would ease competition by regulating prices, wages, and hours. However, the National Recovery Administration was dominated by its business advisers and rarely imposed anything on business against its will. As a result, it was contradictory and inconsistent in its approach. It failed to rein in overproduction and competition over wages and prices, while at the same time strengthening monopoly conditions in industries like auto. It thus became one more failed experiment in voluntary self-regulation by capitalists. Its ineffectiveness was apparent within months of passage, long before the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in May 1935.[29]

The NIRA's demise and the continuation of the Depression thus necessitated a different approach. Wagner thought of his own legislation as a step toward economic recovery. By allowing more bargaining power for workers, it would address the underconsumption and chaotic competition that had long plagued business. And by diverting worker demands into orderly bureaucratic channels, it would restore stable conditions for production. As the Wagner Act stated in its preamble, it aimed "to diminish the causes of labor disputes burdening or obstructing interstate and foreign commerce." It would do so by facilitating unionization and collective bargaining. "The inequality of bargaining power" between labor and capital "tends to aggravate recurrent business depressions, by depressing wage rates and the purchasing power of wage earners in industry and by preventing the stabilization of competitive wage rates and working conditions within and between industries."[30]

Business leaders increasingly agreed on Wagner's diagnosis but were still reluctant to accept independent unionism as a solution. Most hoped that such a dramatic change could still be averted. As of early 1934 their political representatives felt the same. When Wagner introduced the first version of his bill in March 1934, it found little support among his colleagues. The Senate Labor Committee passed a much weaker bill, and Roosevelt put forward a still weaker, "noncontroversial" version that had no appreciable impact once it passed in June.[31]

The calculus of politicians and business shifted over the following year. By fall 1934 Wagner and his team were drafting a new version that passed resoundingly when it was introduced in February 1935 (by a vote of 63 to 12 in the Senate).[32] Democratic gains in the 1934 midterms cannot explain this dramatic reversal. By early 1935 the crisis confronting politicians and employers alike had become more complicated. Now no one could deny the NIRA's failure to end the Depression. Furthermore, the continued economic crisis, the intransigence of capital, and the lack of robust action from government had helped radicalize workers. Employers now faced “the unprecedented managerial and political threat of organized labor,” notes Colin Gordon. The 1,856 strikes of 1934, in which some 1.5 million workers participated, had clarified that threat. The three most noteworthy involved longshore workers on the West Coast, truckers in Minneapolis, and auto parts workers in Toledo. Several features made these strikes especially threatening. All were led by radicals, a fact condemned by employers and top politicians of both parties. All were accompanied by moves toward a general strike in their respective locales. In all cases police killed multiple strikers, yet the movements just became more determined—an ominous signal about the limits of repression. In summer 1934 all ended with the workers winning most of their demands.[33]

By spring 1935 politicians and capitalists shared a perception of continued chaos within the country’s labor force. After introducing his new bill, Robert Wagner warned senators of the “rising tide of industrial discontent.”[34] Representative William Connery implored the House to pass a similar bill by pointing out that strikes might escalate further if they did not. He relayed what one labor representative had told him: “You have seen Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. That is mild. You have not yet seen the gates of hell opened, and that is what is going to happen from now on unless the Congress of the United States passes labor legislation to cure the evils which are existing in industry and which are driving these workers to desperation.”[35]

Connery was perplexed at business leaders who still opposed the legislation: “What we are trying to do … is to save those corporations from communism and bloodshed [by promoting a capitalist-friendly form of unionism as a] bulwark against communism.” Wagner expressed similar exasperation, telling colleagues in June 1935 that since summer 1934 “I have devoted myself to the task of preventing strikes” that might be “an impediment to our economic program.” Other representatives warned, “The passage of this legislation is the only cure for the labor difficulties which have been characteristic for the past few years,” and “[without the legislation] we are going to have an epidemic of strikes that has never before been witnessed in this country.”[36] A temporary decline in strikes in late 1934 and early 1935 did not reassure elites. Political scientist Michael Goldfield, in a detailed study of the roots of the Wagner Act, notes that "fear[s] of even greater labor struggles are echoed by virtually every commentator during the spring of 1935. No opponent in the hearings or on the floor of Congress ever rises to suggest the opposite or even that the descriptions are overdone."[37]

Capitalists shared this perception, but most were still not convinced by Wagner and Connery's logic. Few business leaders supported the act in 1935 and many spoke out forcefully against it. After Roosevelt signed the new law in July, a *Business Week* editorial pledged that "business will not obey this edict," describing it as "tyranny." The rest of the capitalist press remained hostile.[38] On the other hand, the demise of the NIRA and the disruption caused by worker militancy may well have softened capitalists' opposition. There is debate about how "heartfelt and uniform" their public opposition was, and there was in fact a range of business responses to the law. A month before the Wagner Act's passage, Alexander Sachs of the National Recovery Administration wrote that GM and Du Pont's position, while publicly opposed to the bill, had "itself become confused and compromising" in private. The quiet acquiescence witnessed in some industries, such as electrical manufacturing, suggests that some employers may have grudgingly accepted the Wagner Act as a necessary measure. Southern agricultural employers were willing to accept the act since Wagner agreed to exempt them in order to win the support of southern Democrats in Congress.[39]

Though capitalists' power was not neutralized, their opposition was more fractured and ambivalent by early 1935. Their direct control over the state was also reduced due to their glaring failure to generate economic recovery and ensure labor peace and their increasingly hostile rhetoric toward the Roosevelt administration's modest reform efforts. Politicians like Wagner and Roosevelt were still acting on behalf of business—"to save capital," in Roosevelt's words—but business was not, in this case, directly dictating the course of political action. The persistence of economic crisis and labor militancy required policymakers to find an approach that would close “the gates of hell” and restore capitalist stability, even if capitalists were initially reluctant to accept it.[40]

Will Business Obey?

If many capitalists were ambivalent in 1935, others remained staunchly opposed. And capitalist resistance to the new law did not fade quickly. It is sometimes claimed that Congress’s action “compelled employers to accede peacefully to the unionization of their plants.”[41] In reality, numerous employers simply ignored the Wagner Act, and the new National Labor Relations Board was powerless to enforce it. The NLRB complained rather pitifully that “employers were never complying with our orders.” The auto giants and others continued to use spies, illegal firings, and armed violence to crush unionization efforts. *Fortune* wrote that “some observer poised high above the class struggle” in early 1936 “might have thought that capital now had all the advantage.” Furthermore, most observers expected that the business-friendly Supreme Court would overturn it. As John L. Lewis said in January 1937, “We know the Supreme Court, and we have given up hope that the Court will declare the Wagner Act constitutional.” Even after the Supreme Court unexpectedly upheld the act that April, noncompliance initially remained common. The following month Ford thugs beat union leafletters at the “Battle of the Overpass,” and Chicago police murdered ten strikers in the “Memorial Day Massacre” at Republic Steel—the latter crime described by *Fortune* as “one of the most savage moments in the history of American labor struggles.” *Business Week* declared that the fight in Congress and the courts had just been the “first battle” between bosses and workers: “[now] the second battle is on to decide if the winners really won anything.”[42]

Employer compliance was achieved through workers’ own initiative. Historian Irving Bernstein observes that government could not force employers to engage in good-faith bargaining: “The realistic sanction lay not in the order or its ultimate enforcement by the courts but in the power of the union. A strong union got bargaining from the employer; a weak one often did not.” The best demonstration of strength was the strike. Given employers’ recalcitrance, writes Bernstein, “workers were often compelled to resort to strikes rather than to the board to win recognition for their unions."[43] Disruptive strikes waged by workers led notoriously antiunion employers like GM and US Steel to conclude that the NLRB was the lesser-evil option. Starting in 1937 they responded by agreeing to recognize independent unions. Later, often after more strikes, they accepted NLRB elections and the principle of exclusive representation. Doing so meant relinquishing the "divide and rule" tactic of proportional representation schemes. This decision in corporate boardrooms paved the way for the board's growth into a regulatory body with significant power to enforce the law. The onset of another crisis with World War II further limited employers' power to resist the unionization of their workforces, as the federal government took a more assertive enforcement approach in order to guarantee war production.[44] Thus the implementation of the Wagner Act was made possible, first, by a renewed upsurge in labor militancy in the late 1930s and then reinforced by the imperatives of geopolitical crisis.

The most decisive episode in this process was the Great Sit-Down Strike in General Motors plants between late December 1936 and early February 1937. GM represented the pinnacle of big business. Automobiles were the quintessential manufactured good, and GM employed two-thirds of US autoworkers. Union organizers knew that if they could unionize GM then the rest of the auto industry, and the other mass-production sectors, would be easier to crack.[45] The aim, as *Newsweek* magazine observed, was to "single out one company and subject it to the combined, crushing weight of strikes and of competitors greedy for the victim's markets." By besieging "the fortress that dominated the entire automotive industry," the workers could play the company off against its rivals and pave the way for unionization across the industry and the country. The significance of this battle was clear to all. *Business Week* commented, "The company feels itself not only a representative of all automotive management, but of industrial management in all lines. Other companies, lending advice and support to G.M., feel the same."[46]

Traditional organizing strategies had failed due to GM's repressive capacity and its control of local and state governments. By 1936 only a tiny percentage of autoworkers were unionized. As Communist organizer

Wyndham Mortimer recalled, independent unions established under the NIRA "had been destroyed by the concerted attacks of the AFL and the automobile employers," capped by Roosevelt's endorsement of company unions in 1934.[47] The low union membership was certainly not a sign of worker contentment with their employers. The profits of the Big Three skyrocketed between 1932 and 1936, with GM's after-tax profits rising from $8 billion to $240 billion. If many workers had grudgingly accepted their misery when it seemed like their employers were struggling, they expected to be compensated with lighter work or better wages when times improved. Instead, GM ruthlessly sped up the assembly line while keeping wages almost flat and refusing to rehire workers it had laid off. Executives' salaries, meanwhile, jumped as much as 100 percent between 1934 and 1935. The speedups were the most tangible expression of injustice for most workers and were the primary grievance heard by UAW organizers in Flint in 1936. As the UAW's Henry Kraus later wrote, "It was always the speedup, the horrible speedup."[48]

The strategy involved recruiting a militant minority of the workforce and launching a strike on the educated guess that most of the other workers would join (a strategy that is very different from that of most unionization campaigns today). The strike would target "mother plants," the factories that produced essential components for the entire GM supply chain. The two Fisher Body plants that the workers occupied in Flint just before New Year's were a wise choice given their indispensability to the production network and the fact that automobile "bodies can't be stored in large quantities," as *Business Week* observed. The magazine noted that organizers had "skillfully picked out the bottle-necks of production and choked them off."[49]

A normal strike might have been defeated with strikebreakers, but the fact that workers were occupying the plants—and that hundreds of previously timid workers joined the initiators—handcuffed GM by "rendering impotent the traditional strikebreaking technics," wrote Kraus.[50] Organizers in Flint got the idea from workers elsewhere who had sat down on the job. In early 1936 rubber workers in Akron had carried out a successful sit-down against Goodyear, which was followed by massive enrollment in the United Rubber Workers of America. The victory "gave the sitdown nationwide publicity" and "sent the strike wave surging to a new high," noted *Fortune* in a later analysis. When GM workers in Flint and several other cities occupied their plants in late December, it became clear that the dangerous example was spreading, leaving "all industry wondering how to stop it."[51]

Figure 9: Workers guarding the window of an occupied Flint plant during the Great Sit-Down Strike. Photographer unknown (public domain).

The Flint strike continued for forty-four days. During that time the workers withstood two judicial injunctions, GM's attempts to shut off heat and prevent food deliveries, a violent attack by Flint police who shot and injured thirteen workers, and GM's effort to recruit a "Flint Alliance" of workers and residents to crush the strike. At each turn the workers thwarted the company. They ignored the injunctions. When GM tried to freeze them out, they opened the plant windows to let the expensive water system freeze, forcing the company to turn the heat back on. The workers' outreach to the Flint community, and most Flint residents' own familiarity with GM, helped neutralize GM's attempts to break the strike.[52] On February 1 the workers' occupation of an extra Chevrolet plant "demonstrated the union's ability to spread the strike whenever necessary," recounted Mortimer, who was representing the workers before Governor Frank Murphy. The February Chevrolet sit-down "was the chief factor that caused General Motors to reply favorably to a letter from Governor Murphy requesting a meeting between the company and the union," he wrote.[53]

Figure 10: Workers during the Great Sit-Down Strike. The occupation left workers with a lot of free time, which they spent on everything from ping-pong to discussing the news, including from radical publications that circulated in the plants (Kraus, *Many and the Few*, 86–105). Photographer unknown (public domain).

Finally, GM buckled. The sit-downs at just a minority of its plants had paralyzed most of its national operations. "Every day that the strike lasted it was getting about 10,000 cars farther behind," reported *Business Week*. Steven DuBrul of GM wrote that "unless [GM] made satisfactory concessions it would be losing the greater part of this year's market." Under the February 11 settlement GM agreed to let all strikers keep their jobs, to let workers wear union buttons, and to temporarily make the UAW the exclusive bargaining agent at the seventeen plants where workers had struck, which would implicitly give the union time to sign up a majority of workers. GM also agreed to begin contract negotiations. From 1936 to 1937, UAW membership jumped from 20,000 to 400,000.[54]

Why was violent eviction of the strikers not a viable option? The dominant answer among scholars is that Frank Murphy, the Democratic governor of Michigan, and President Roosevelt made the difference by declining to murder strikers and by nudging GM to negotiate. The leading study of the strike argues that Murphy's refusal to use force or to cut off relief payments to workers' families "was the single most important factor" in its success. Numerous others have argued that the Flint victory "was only possible because Frank Murphy was governor." The takeaway lesson for today is clear: "electing allies to office" must be a priority of the labor movement.[55]

Interestingly, contemporary accounts from both the business press and Flint-based organizers placed less emphasis on liberal politicians. Strike organizers did note the value of Murphy and Roosevelt's restraint but did not assign it the preeminent importance found in most later accounts. They made clear that the sit-down "render[ed] impotent the traditional strikebreaking technics" (Kraus) and that the expansion of the sit-downs forced GM to the negotiating table in early February (Mortimer).[56] From the other side of the political spectrum, *Fortune* and *Business Week* also stressed the importance of the sit-down tactic and other worker actions. *Fortune* reported that GM workers, drawing upon the example of Akron rubber workers and other sit-down strikers, "had developed a new organizing technique and a new strike strategy" that thwarted the company's efforts to break the strike. Their victory owed largely to this "new concept of strike action" as compared with earlier strikes, including the unsuccessful 1934 textile strikes. As noted above, the magazine argued that the "assistance rendered by the government" to labor in the mid-1930s was "itself symptomatic of a real pressure" coming from elsewhere.[57]

Sociologists Joshua Murray and Michael Schwartz elaborate on this point. Based on a detailed analysis of the Flint sit-downs, they conclude that while Democratic victory in elections "definitely contributed to the labor movement's success, it was not the primary factor that it may seem to have been on the surface." They instead emphasize the ingenuity of union organizers like Wyndham Mortimer and Bob Travis, the democratic structure of shop-floor organizing that allowed rank-and-file workers to take initiative, and the discipline and perseverance of the strikers and their community supporters. These assets allowed the workers to triumph despite the fact that the sit-downs were widely considered illegal (as even Mortimer told Murphy) and despite the tenuous legal status of the Wagner Act, which the Supreme Court did not approve until two months after the strikers' victory over GM.[58]

The workers won primarily because they tied GM's hands. The company itself actually opposed a violent expulsion of the strikers. GM conveyed to Murphy both publicly and privately that the strikers should not be "evicted by force." It was concerned in part for its reputation, which was vulnerable given its reliance on consumer sales.[59] It also knew that a violent eviction risked major damage to expensive machinery. The eviction of sit-down strikers in some other US cities in spring 1937 was limited to sit-downs involving much smaller numbers. In Flint there were, by GM's own tally, 653 workers occupying its two Fisher Body plants as of mid-January. As Murray and Schwartz note, "Murphy was also protecting GM equipment" by not sending in the National Guard. Whether the National Guard was ready to commit massive violence was also in doubt. As historian Sidney Fine writes, the local National Guard "was made up of youngsters without previous experience in riot duty and with little stomach for an assignment that might have involved the shooting of fellow citizens." National Guard staff in Flint, "impressed with the difficulty of apprehending and taking to court the several thousand persons inside and outside the plants against whom the court order was directed," strongly advised Murphy not to send the guard in.[60]

A violent assault on hundreds of sit-down strikers would have carried unacceptable risks: damage to GM's machinery and image, a possible breakdown of discipline among National Guard forces, and, as a result, unknowable disruption to labor-capital relations and the US political order far beyond Flint. Had GM strongly urged violent eviction, and had the guard been comfortable with the plan, Murphy and Roosevelt might have made a different choice. The strikers had wagered correctly that the risks of a violent eviction were too high for elite decision-makers.

The GM sit-downs had a thrilling effect on other workers, who were at least as inspired by successful worker action as by abstract victories like the election of Democrats. The sit-down gave an immediate impetus to unionization efforts in other auto companies and across the whole economy. As one steelworker told union organizers, “Wait till you win the auto strike. Then we’ll join.”[61] Unionized or not, other workers learned the lesson of the Flint victory and sought to replicate it. The sit-down tactic spread to “every conceivable type of worker”: retail workers, bakers, garbage collectors, textile workers, custodians, incarcerated workers, and numerous others. In March alone there were 170 recorded sit-down strikes, with Detroit the epicenter. By year’s end there had been 477 sit-down strikes (and 4,740 total strikes) in the United States, which are in fact underestimates since they omit strikes lasting less than a day or involving fewer than six workers. These figures are especially impressive given that few politicians or newspapers voiced support for sit-down strikes, many ferociously condemned the tactic, and most of the US public was opposed.[62] Union leaders themselves often opposed sit-downs, and strikes in general, fearing that worker militancy would incur legal penalties and jeopardize the cordial relationships they sought to build with the bosses. But one advantage of the sit-down tactic was the power it gave to workers on the assembly line. As *Newsweek* observed in January 1937, “The newer, more spontaneous method belongs first of all to the rank and file; the workers themselves may invoke it when they like.” This approach fostered informal rank-and-file leadership. As UAW organizer Bob Travis said of the Flint workforce after the famous sit-down had ended, “Leaders are popping up everywhere.” This rank-and-file control was apparent in the thousands of unauthorized (“wildcat”) strikes of the late 1930s and 1940s.[63]

After GM's capitulation, the next most important victory came within weeks, when the leader of the steel industry, US Steel, consented to unionization. Its shift resulted from the threat of similar disruption among its own workforce, which was heightened by the Congress of Industrial Organizations' (CIO's) emphasis on interracial organizing.[64] US Steel also hoped that a moderate union would help regulate competition by forcing competitors to agree to the same wages. As one steel executive told *Fortune* magazine, "we knew we were the next citadel for assault by the CIO, and, in point of fact, we *had* to sign. Financially, we were in no position to stand a two- or three-month shutdown of production or to carry the ball for the rest of the industry." This logic was echoed in the *Wall Street Journal*, which described US Steel's efforts "to prevent renewal of predatory competition." Minimizing competition and ensuring labor stability became especially important given the growing global demand for steel in the late 1930s. US Steel, like GM right before it, concluded that an independent but nonradical union was now the lesser-evil option since it might actually "promote efficiency and quiet," as banker Alexander Sachs characterized the companies' logic.[65] Notably, the top two mass-production corporations in the country had both capitulated before the Supreme Court upheld the Wagner Act in April 1937.

Competing explanations have been offered for the court's decision. New Deal scholars who center elites and intellectuals ascribe the ruling to "the National Labor Relations Board's litigation strategy," which supposedly led the court's majority to bow to superior reason and evidence.[66] This explanation is dubious given the Supreme Court's entire history and its record in the mid-1930s in particular. The court had generally been hostile to the New Deal, overturning many programs and laws in 1935 and 1936. Its May 1936 ruling in *Carter v. Carter Coal Co.* had invalidated a law pertaining to the coal industry that "contained essentially the same labor provisions as those in the Wagner Act," writes James Gross, the leading historian of the NLRB. Furthermore, the Roosevelt administration's attorneys in that case had made the same legal argument (hinging on the impacts on interstate commerce) that the NLRB was then using to defend Wagner's constitutionality. Following the *Carter* decision employers rejoiced and NLRB officials despaired, all expecting the court to overturn Wagner as well.[67]

Given this background, Gross argues "it is reasonable to discount the effect of the board's strategy and arguments and to give major credit to environmental conditions" in shaping the decision of the court. The major such condition, he suggests, was what NLRB investigator Heber Blankenhorn called "the facts of industrial relations," meaning the potential for escalating strike activity and employer repression. It was a very tangible prospect, since oral arguments concluded the same day that GM and the UAW signed their February 11 agreement. As Blankenhorn predicted a month before, events in "auto, steel, and coal [might] possibly 'render constitutional' the Wagner Act." In a context of ongoing strikes, "The concept may dawn even on the Court that a Government Labor Board is in some measure a necessary alternative to a general labor war." *Fortune* later argued that had the court overturned the act, "the labor situation in the US might swiftly have become blood and chaos." This argument was often repeated by the law's supporters, in and out of court, in the lead-up to April 1937. The court's own decision was explicit in stating that unionization "is often an essential condition of industrial peace." Blankenhorn also commented that once GM and US Steel capitulated to unionization, there was less reason for swing vote Justice Owen Roberts to vote against Wagner.[68] There was now more incentive for a probusiness judge to support the law, since it would help compel those companies' competitors to unionize.

Even the Supreme Court ruling did not automatically lead employers to comply, at least not fully. The Wagner Act had mandated exclusive representation to stop employers from pitting one worker faction against another—"divide and rule," in GM's words. Yet on February 11 GM had only temporarily recognized the UAW as the sole bargaining agent and only in some GM plants. Durable recognition of exclusive representation would come in 1940, after the company itself requested an NLRB election to select an exclusive bargaining agent by majority vote. This was a dramatic departure from earlier GM policy, and it was driven by the same forces—worker strikes and the desperate quest for business stability—that had motivated its concessions in February 1937. Between 1937 and 1939 the new UAW split into two competing factions, one affiliated with the CIO and the other with the AFL. Though the AFL leaders were more conservative, they were dragged leftward by the demands of their members. By early 1939 the competition for workers' allegiance was giving rise to "new demands on the companies," including for a thirty-hour work week, and workers had begun striking over those demands. The problem, noted one observer: "Where factionalism is strong, union officials are especially likely to feel they must bring home the bacon." It took this new round of disruption for GM to finally accept exclusive representation as a way to end the chaos engendered by unions' jurisdictional competition.[69]

Other companies and industries evinced a similar logic. In the late 1930s and 1940s employers increasingly recognized "intra-union conflict as a threat to peace." The head of the Automobile Manufacturers Association warned in 1939 that without a binding NLRB election, "the manufacturer [would] find himself ground between the millstones of union factionalism." As *Business Week* reported in 1938, more employers now "looked to the government for help" to help them deal with strikes and escalating worker demands. As a result, the NLRB was finally endowed with enforcement power. Whereas it handled just 203 union election cases in fiscal year 1935–36, by 1941 the number reached 13,856.[70]

World War II reinforced this trajectory, for two reasons. First, the federal government forced many of the most recalcitrant employers, under implicit threat of nationalization, to accept unions; in exchange, capitalists got lucrative military contracts, wage controls, and government-assisted repression of labor militancy. In the case of Ford, worker disruption and the company's brazen disobedience of the Wagner Act led the Roosevelt administration to threaten to withhold contracts and then to intervene to settle a massive strike at Ford's River Rouge plant in April 1941.[71] The conjunction of the geopolitical emergency and the disruptive class warfare inside Ford plants forced the previously timid administration to take decisive action to ensure smooth industrial output.

Second, the war reaffirmed employers' sense that union leadership could help them discipline the rank and file. The need was obvious. From 1938 to

1941 there were 12,181 strikes, many initiated by rank-and-file organizers over their leaders' fierce objections. Then, despite the nearly universal agreement from labor's national leaders to a wartime no-strike policy, there were 16,426 more strikes in 1942–45, most undertaken by workers illegally and in defiance of union leadership.[72] The fact that labor leaders so often failed "to keep labor in step" (as Roosevelt ordered Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers) did not blind employers to their potential utility. In 1942 a Roosevelt appointee on the War Labor Board wrote, "The maintenance of a stable union membership makes for the maintenance of responsible union leadership." Those "responsible and cooperative" union leaders would discipline their "irresponsible and uncooperative members" who sought to "disrupt relations and hamper production."[73] Much of the wartime disruption was related to ongoing jurisdictional conflicts between union factions. By war's end the nation's top employers were searching even more desperately for "definite procedures under which such jurisdictional disputes can be peacefully resolved," given that they were "helpless while factions of labor contend with each other." They reversed their prior position and embraced the hated NLRB. By 1945 the dominant preference among major employers was to allow for elections to select "collective bargaining representatives" under the auspices of "the National Labor Relations Board and corresponding state agencies." These "orderly legal procedures" were deemed preferable to worker militancy.[74]

The conditions that brought success to the sit-downs of 1936–37 diminished greatly between the late 1930s and late 1940s. Success against GM had been possible due, first and foremost, to the creativity and militancy of rankand-file organizers. The capitalist counteroffensive took aim at that source of strength using both carrots and sticks. Employers cultivated "responsible and cooperative" union leaders and offered them union security clauses and modest raises for members. Simultaneously they outlawed sit-down strikes (which both the NLRB and Supreme Court ruled against in 1939), purged radicals from union leadership, and further restricted union activity through the 1943 Smith-Connally Act, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, and other measures. The US auto industry overhauled its entire production structure, which helped it dominate workers more effectively by impeding shop-floor disruptions.[75]

Labor leaders themselves bear substantial blame, for most were willingly "cooperative" or at least failed to build upon the radical organizing approach that had brought victory in Flint. Soon after the 1937 victory at US Steel the United Steelworkers became "one of the most stable and well-behaved unions," as *Business Week* wrote in 1939. The magazine gave "about 99% of the credit to Philip Murray," the steel workers' leader and soon-to-be CIO president. Rather than behaving as though management was the enemy, leaders like Murray cultivated cozy relations with the bosses. Rather than building rank-and-file power on the shop floor, they poured union resources into electoral and legislative politics.[76]

The consequences were apparent by the late 1940s. Labor lobbied intensely, and unsuccessfully, against the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act that imposed severe restrictions on union activity. It then went all-out in support of Truman and the Democrats in the 1948 election, in the vain hope that the victors would repeal Taft-Hartley. As sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward observed in the mid-1970s, "Although the investment of the unions in electoral politics increased, the ability of labor unions to protect the gains that had been won in the mid-1930s rapidly diminished."[77] That verdict has become only more justified in the decades since.

Reassessing the Mainstream Explanation

We can now revisit the dominant explanation for the New Deal, the one that stresses the role of leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Robert Wagner, and Frank Murphy. This interpretation has influenced the thinking of numerous scholars and activists. Many studies of the Flint sit-down strikes conclude that "electing allies to office" is essential for a social movement's success. Similarly, one study of the Depression-era movement for social security argues that "collective action will be most productive if it focuses on elected officials." Theda Skocpol, a prominent sociologist known in part for her work on the New Deal, has argued that the climate movement should focus on "pressing politicians for change."[78]

Many climate organizers have drawn similar lessons. For example, some cite the New Deal in support of their strategic emphasis on the need to "elect friendly politicians."[79] In a recent book edited by organizers from the Sunrise Movement, US labor official Bob Master makes the lessons explicit. It was Congress's passage of the Wagner Act and then "the historic election campaign of 1936 that ultimately endowed the industrial working class with the confidence to challenge the corporate tyranny of basic industry." Master warns leftists against overestimating the role of "rank-and-file militancy and mass strikes" and underestimating the role of friendly politicians. "The CIO needed Senator Wagner and his congressional allies to create a new framework for collective bargaining," which in turn gave workers the "confidence" to confront their employers.[80] In this narrative great credit goes to congressional initiative. Congress is also endowed with the power to impose its will on capitalists: the Wagner Act compelled "employers to accede peacefully to the unionization of their plants."[81] The takeaway for today is that the climate movement should focus much, even most, of its energies on "electing friendly politicians."

As I have argued, this conventional interpretation of the Wagner Act is based on a misreading of the record. The escalation of worker militancy began long before 1936 and even well before the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in June 1933. The pre-NIRA upsurge of 1929–33 helped enable labor's growth throughout the rest of the decade. Successful organizing in coal, textiles, and other sectors demonstrated to other workers what was possible, and by resuscitating the United Mine Workers it brought an influx of union dues that were then used to fund organizing in auto, steel, meatpacking, and other mass production industries.[82] Worker militancy in auto and adjacent industries predated the November 1936 election, and the election does not figure as a central source of worker "confidence" in contemporary accounts by either sit-down strike organizers or their enemies.[83] The claim of one historian that "the CIO might have remained little more than a general staff and officers corps without the electrifying electoral victory of 1936" ignores the organizing groundwork that people like Wyndham Mortimer had been laying, independently of electoral campaigns, in the months and years prior.[84] It also misses the centrality of workplace class conflict in determining the ebbs and flows of worker militancy. In the auto industry, shop floor militancy surged in 1936–37 (and continued for a decade) because the Big Three were making record profits while intensifying their exploitation of workers, which violated workers' sense of justice. It also surged because workers had discovered how to exploit chokepoints in the industry's structure of production. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s workers everywhere learned from each other. More so than legislation and the "electrifying electoral victory" of Democrats, it was the "electrifying demonstration effect" of other exploited people taking bold actions that moved workers to do likewise.[85] Observers at the time, including in capitalist circles, often perceived this phenomenon more clearly than later academics.

There are additional problems with a narrative that stresses the importance of "friendly politicians" like Wagner, FDR, and Frank Murphy. None of those politicians were as ideologically friendly to workers as they are commonly portrayed. To the extent they acted in support of workers, they were largely guided by pragmatic concern for the overall health of the economy, which required workplace stability. Nor did those politicians have the power to force capitalists to "accede peacefully to the unionization of their plants." Long after the Wagner Act's signing in July 1935, numerous major employers across the country refused to allow unions. Only after workers took disruptive collective action to force implementation did the most recalcitrant capitalists finally accede to it (and never without reservations).

A more limited claim is more tenable: that some workers were *further emboldened* by national events like NIRA's Section 7(a) in 1933, the Wagner Act's passage in 1935, and the 1936 election landslide, and they escalated their militancy *in part* in response to these favorable outcomes. Even this claim must be treated cautiously, since it's often based on claims made in later decades or on statements from top labor leaders like John L. Lewis who were not doing the organizing work themselves.[86] There is, nonetheless, much evidence of workers perceiving Roosevelt and other New Deal politicians as their allies. This perception was one of several "facilitating factors" that encouraged workers' militancy. In this interpretation, electoral and legislative politics, even if mostly symbolic, sometimes facilitated working-class resistance to capital; that resistance in turn generated new impacts on elections, legislation, and the courts, as well as on capitalists themselves.[87] This dynamic is common in history. The movement to abolish slavery had likewise benefited from the rise of free-soil politics and the Republican Party, and one could locate similar parallels elsewhere.

However, here again arises the question of priority posed by Errico Malatesta in 1924: "Since no one can do everything in this world," we must decide what uses of our limited energy are most efficacious.[88] Elections and politicians are one variable that helps shape the prospects for movement success. But it does not follow that electoral and legislative campaigns are the best way for movements to spend our resources, or even the best way to influence what politicians do. Most working-class activism of the 1930s—in numbers, hours, sweat, money—was not focused on electoral canvassing and legislative lobbying, yet it powerfully influenced officeholders. When favorable government actions did expand the opportunities available to labor, those actions stemmed mostly from the "forces that the depression stimulated and revitalized," as *Fortune* suggested: the ongoing market chaos and the clash between workers and employers. Some other business-friendly sources at the time drew a similar conclusion. A later report commissioned by the Republican minority in the Senate noted that "it must be admitted that in obtaining these gains [from government], strikes often played a conspicuous part."[89] One of the key legislative victories of the 1930s, the famous Section 7(a) that so many scholars say "inspired" workers to organize, certainly did not come as a result of large-scale worker campaigning or lobbying. Labor union participation in the 1932 election was minimal. If anything, it was the nonelectoral militancy in the coal sector in 1929–33, often organized by radicals, that gave Lewis the leverage to demand 7(a)'s inclusion in the NIRA as a way of restoring labor discipline and "combating Communism."[90] In later elections labor did mount a larger electoral effort, though whether that was the most effective use of unions' time and money is doubtful.[91]

Implications for the Climate Movement

Understandings of the New Deal have helped shape left and liberal strategies since the 1930s. My rereading of New Deal labor reforms has been based on the insights of radical organizers and scholars as well as the observations of capitalists and business media at the time. Interestingly, these sources often coincide in their causal explanations. They hold several lessons for today's climate movement.

One is similar to the key takeaway from the previous chapter: we do not need the support of an electoral majority if we have strong support from a sizable minority that is structurally positioned to undermine a system by withholding labor, money, or other resources. The Great Sit-Down Strike shows that we may not even need prior support from a majority within a workplace before taking action. This minority action tends to be more effective than election-centered approaches. Organizing people to directly confront polluters, banks, insurance companies, and employers will usually result in bigger impacts on both the targets and on government. In other chapters I offer more specifics about the current and potential forms of such minority action in the climate movement. In the conclusion I will say more about what role the labor movement might play in the climate war. Despite the decline of mass production industries in the United States, workers in diverse sectors still possess the power to disrupt production, transportation, and logistical operations, which gives them potential leverage over economic and political elites.[92]

Second, targeting one or a handful of powerful entities, and winning, can generate positive ripple effects across entire industries. The GM union organizers knew that a victory there would pave the way for unionization across the auto industry and other mass production sectors. GM's capitulation inspired other workers to strike and to unionize. It also influenced the decisions of other employers as well as government, including, it seems, the Supreme Court. The climate movement can generate a parallel momentum by applying concentrated pressure against particular companies, industries, or state and local governments. As the Rainforest Action Network argues, if they can "move" one or more "major corporations, it puts pressure on the whole industry, leading to entire sectoral shifts."[93] Chapter 2 noted some of the ways this dynamic is already playing out on climate policy. Chapter 6 will offer some additional examples of how local victories might generate broader change.

A third lesson of the 1930s labor upsurge is that the climate movement will benefit from organizational structures that promote creativity and experimentation by the rank and file. The work stoppages that caused so many headaches for capitalists and politicians were usually spearheaded by rank-and-file workers or local union leaders rather than top labor officials. The latter were more distant from the realities of the shop floor and were also afraid of incurring legal penalties or souring their negotiating relationships with capitalists and politicians. Locally rooted organizers were crucial to the development and execution of strategy. Today many labor unions or nonprofits realize the importance of local organizers in mobilizing people, but most are not set up to foster rank-and-file participation in strategic decisions. The victorious strategies of the 1930s cannot be mechanically replicated today. Like the sit-down strikers in Flint, today's climate movement must be creative in exploiting available pressure points. Participatory organizations can help us find them.

Membership figures based on Irving Bernstein, *Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920–1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 84; Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920–1935* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 121–22n65. For a contemporary account see Robert W. Dunn, *The Americanization of Labor: The Employers' Offensive against the Trade Unions* (New York: International, 1927).

Speech to NAM, Absecon, NJ, September 17, 1939, pp. 6 (1st quote), 8 (6th quote); Brown, "Problems of Industrial Organization and Control," speech to Chicago Chapter of Society for Advancement of Management, November 16, 1945, pp. 1 (4th quote), 2 (5th quote), 4 (2nd quote); Brown, untitled speech, March 8, 1943, p. 5 (3rd quote); all Brown documents are in the Donaldson Brown papers, box 5, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

Brown, speech to NAM, September 17, 1939, pp. 8–9; Brown, untitled speech, March 8, 1943, p. 6.

Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2005), esp. 55–61.

Domestically the offensive included legal, economic, political, and ideological means; overt violence after 1945 was mostly reserved for dissenters in the Global South. On the domestic side see David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (London: Secker

& Warburg, 1978); Howell John Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); James A. Gross, *Broken Promise: The Subversion of U.S. Labor Relations Policy, 1947–1994* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Katznelson, *Affirmative Action*, 61–74; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade against the New Deal* (New York: Norton, 2009).

On the macroeconomics of wartime conversion and lessons for today see Andrew Bossie and J.W. Mason, *The Public Role in Economic Transformation: Lessons from World War II* (New York: Roosevelt Institute, 2020).

Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol, "State, Party, and Industry: From Business Recovery to the Wagner Act in America's New Deal," in *Statemaking and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory*, ed. Charles Bright and Susan Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 165, 172, 178. On the climate movement see the penultimate section below.

"The Industrial War," *Fortune*, November 1937, 156. On Malatesta see the introduction.

"Industrial War," 107–8.

George Gallup and Claude Robinson, "American Institute of Public Opinion—Surveys, 1935–38," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1938): 379; Mildred Strunk, ed., "The Quarter's Polls," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1947–48): 643.

One study of media coverage of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which drastically limited union power and barred Communists from leadership positions, found that 91 percent of coverage in general interest outlets like *Reader's Digest* and *The New Yorker* favored Taft-Hartley; less than 1 percent opposed it. Philip Ash, "The Periodical Press and the Taft-Hartley Act," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 270.

Bruno Ramirez, *When Workers Fight: The Politics of Industrial Relations in the Progressive Era, 1898–1916* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1978), 65–84; G. William Domhoff, *The Power Elite and the State: How Policy Is Made in America* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990), 72–79.

DuBrul quoted in Gordon, *New Deals*, 39, 94; last two quotes in Gordon, *New Deals*, 96. On coal see also Ramirez, *When Workers Fight*, 17–29. This logic was especially appealing when union leaders exercised "iron-handed control over the union," as one coal official described John L. Lewis's control of the United Mine Workers; quoted in Gordon, *New Deals*, 108n35.

David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 48–81; Ramirez, *When Workers Fight*, 147–59; David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 48–90; Domhoff, *Power Elite*, 87.

Gordon, *New Deals*, 37, 217 (quote).

Gordon, *New Deals*, 122.

Quoted in Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 77. This section expands upon Kevin A. Young, Tarun Banerjee, and Michael Schwartz, *Levers of Power: How The 1% Rules and What the 99% Can Do about It* (London: Verso, 2020), 67–71.

Bernstein, *Lean Years*, 426–55; Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492–Present*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 378–82 (Ford quoted, 378). On organizing early in the Depression see also Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: How They Succeed, Why They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 41–95; Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 49–68; Roy Rosenzweig,

"Organizing the Unemployed: The Early Years of the Great Depression, 1929–1933," *Radical America* 10, no. 4 (1976): 37–60.
Charles R. Walker, "Relief and Revolution: The Prospect for Next Winter," *The Forum* 88, no. 3 (1932): 156, 158 (quote). See also Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed," 39–47.
Michael Goldfield and Cody R. Melcher, "The Myth of Section 7(a): Worker Militancy, Progressive Labor Legislation, and the Coal Miners," *Labor* 16, no. 4 (2019): 53–61; Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 77–95; Kim Moody, *Breaking the Impasse: Electoral Politics, Mass Action, and the New Socialist Movement in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2022), 118 (Muste quoted). Goldfield and Melcher offer a detailed refutation of the hegemonic assumption about Section 7(a).
Walker, "Relief and Revolution," 156; Goldfield and Melcher, "Myth of Section 7(a)," 54–57.
Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 212–65; Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
Irving Bernstein is hostile to the Communists but admits they did "raise relief standards in some communities" and "hasten the coming of federal relief "; *Lean Years*, 434. On Congressional requests see George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 373, 377–78.
Irving Bernstein, *The New Deal Collective Bargaining Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 24; Goldfield and Melcher, "Myth," 53–61.
The quote is from Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, describing Roosevelt's and her own position; quoted in William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 150. See also Bernstein, *New Deal*, 25–27, 62.
Quoted in John Newsinger, *Fighting Back: The American Working Class in the 1930s* (London: Bookmarks, 2012), 138.
R.D. Whitehead quoted in Gordon, *New Deals*, 19.
Gordon, *New Deals*, 211 (Steven DuBrul of GM quoted); Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 172–85 (quotes 173, 177); Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 31 (Brown quoted); Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morias, *Labor's Untold Story: The Adventure Story of Battles, Betrayals and Victories of American Working Men and Women* (New York: Cameron Associates, 1955), 291.
Gordon, *New Deals*, 166–203; Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 92–108.
29 U.S.C. § 151. On concern for worker purchasing power as an imperative for economic recovery see also Bernstein, *New Deal*, 69, 90, 101–2, 112; Leon H. Keyserling, "Wagner Act: Its Origin and Current Significance," *George Washington Law Review* 29, no. 2 (1960): 218–20.
Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 192, 195–97, 205; Bernstein, *New Deal*, 77 (quote).
The House's vote on the counterpart bill did not include a roll call; it later approved the conference version 132 to 42. Bernstein, *New Deal*, 116, 126–27.
Gordon, *New Deals*, 218; Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 217; Levine, *Class Struggle*, 117–28. At least fifty-five strikers were killed in 1933–34. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 125–26.
Quoted in Michael Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency, Radical Organization, and New Deal Labor Legislation," *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 4 (1989): 1273.

NLRB, *Legislative History of the National Labor Relations Act, 1935* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1985), 1:1150.

NLRB, *Legislative History*, 1152 ("bulwark"), 1233 (Wagner); other quotes in Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency," 1275–76. Even some who argue that "progressive policy entrepreneurs" like Wagner were "the driving force behind the substance and passage of the Wagner Act" admit that those entrepreneurs were driven largely, or even primarily, by fears of mass unrest: "At the center of Wagner's progressivist world-view was the belief that only collective bargaining could legitimately elicit the acquiescence of workers." Mark Barenberg, "The Political Economy of the Wagner Act: Power, Symbol, and Workplace Cooperation," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 7 (1993): 1402n88, 1403.

Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency," 1273. See also Bernstein, *New Deal*, 112, though Bernstein also argues that "many Senators" voted for the 1935 bill to avoid displeasing the AFL and because they assumed the Supreme Court would rule it unconstitutional anyway (116).

On negative press reaction to the Wagner bills see Bernstein, *New Deal*, 67, 99, 109–10, 117. *Business Week* cried, "[The Wagner Act] is injustice aggravated by usurpation. It is tyranny. It is a piece of despotism which business will unitedly resist." "No Obedience!" *Business Week*, July 6, 1935, 40. This polemic overstated not only the law's radicalism but also the intensity and uniformity of business opposition.

Gordon, *New Deals*, 120, 205 ("heartfelt and uniform"), 219 (Sachs quoted); Domhoff, *Power Elite*, 97–98. On the range of employer reactions to the act see also Harris, *Right*, 23–37.

That is, the apparent degree of "autonomy" of the state at this juncture was not due primarily to the "persistent determination" of liberals in government or the growth of "state capacity" between 1933 and 1935, as Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol assert; "State, Party," 161, 172. Finegold and Skocpol are correct that the failure of the NIRA showed "that businessmen could not deliver economic recovery" (182), but they wrongly view class conflict as peripheral to the legislative process. The strikes of 1934 and the spread of revolutionary sentiments contributed to the sense of ongoing disruption and radicalization that informed Congress members' votes in 1935. For a detailed rebuttal to Finegold and Skocpol see Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency."

Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 151.

"Industrial War," 106, 160, 179 (NLRB quoted); William J. Cronin, "Sit-Down," June 27, 1939, p. 7, in National Association of Manufacturers files, box 960, folder 23, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE (Lewis quoted); "Steel Interprets Wagner Act," *Business Week*, May 15, 1937, 15. For GM repression see Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers* (Los Angeles: Plantin, 1947), 76–77, 125–45; Jerold S. Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 109–14, 145–46; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 23.

Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 651; Bernstein, *New Deal*, 144.

Though employers would be heftily compensated with government contracts, high profits, and prohibitions on strikes.

Boyer and Morias, *Labor's*, 300–301. Two valuable accounts of the GM organizing drive and sit-downs by participant-observers are Wyndham Mortimer, *Organize! My Life as a Union Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1971), and Kraus, *Many and the Few*. Fine's *Sit-Down* is the most detailed study.

"Strike: Militant 'Trespassers' Demonstrate a New Model, Confound General Motors, and Imperil an Unhappy Strategist," *Newsweek*, January 16, 1937, 6; Mortimer, *Organize!* 137 (second quote); "Beyond the Automobile Strike," *Business Week*, February 6, 1937, 15.

Mortimer, *Organize!* 85. Mortimer's ties to the Communist Party may only have been formalized later. Roger Keeran writes that by 1939 his "association with the CP was an open secret"; *Communist Party*, 205.

Fine, *Sit-Down*, 21; Kraus, *Many and the Few*, 44; Samuel Romer, "Profile of General Motors," *The Nation*, January 23, 1937, 97; Murray and Schwartz, *Wrecked*, 117–21, 145. For Mortimer's account of the early organizing see *Organize!* 103–20.

"New Strategy in Labor War," *Business Week*, January 30, 1937, 15. On the contrast with later unionization strategies see Moody, *Breaking the Impasse*, 130–51.

Kraus, *Many and the Few*, 92. Keeran writes that at this point "the Communist Party had a hundred members in Flint, a good portion of whom were rank and file workers," which suggests both the important organizing functions they performed and their ability to win over other autoworkers. Outside the plants, Communist women organized community support for the strikers; "many women were active in the mob rule," as the official industry account of the sit-downs noted. Keeran, *Communist Party*, 166 (first quote), 169–70, 181; Cronin, "Sit-Down," 17.

"Industrial War," 160; "New Strategy," 15 (last quote). On Akron and other precedents see Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* rev. ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 193–204; Murray and Schwartz, *Wrecked*, 126–33.

Business Week reported in mid-January that despite the paralysis of business in the city, "Opinion in Flint blames [the] company for not preventing violence," whereas "elsewhere the Union loses popular favor." See "G.M. and Union Woo the Public," *Business Week*, January 16, 1937, 13. On the January 11 "Battle of the Running Bulls" see Fine, *Sit-Down*, 1–13.

Mortimer, *Organize!* 131. Seventeen total GM plants had struck; Fine, *Sit-Down*, 305.

"Beyond the Automobile Strike," 15; Gordon, *New Deals*, 232 (DuBrul quoted); Mortimer, *Organize!* 139–41, 161.

Fine, *Sit-Down*, 224; Erik Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes* (New York: New Press, 2018), 113, 127.

Kraus, *Many and the Few*, 81, 92 (quote); Mortimer, *Organize!* 124–25, 131, 134.

"Industrial War," 156, 164, 166; "New Strategy."

Murray and Schwartz, *Wrecked*, 139; Mortimer, *Organize!* 133.

Fine, *Sit-Down*, 235–36 (quote, 236).

"Strike: Militant 'Trespassers' Demonstrate a New Model," 6 (653 figure); Fine, *Sit-Down*, 294; Murray and Schwartz, *Wrecked*, 140. Often overlooked is the fact that Murphy owned over $100,000 in GM stock when the strike began; Fine, p. 155.

Quoted in Fine, *Sit-Down*, 310.

Fine, *Sit-Down*, (quote) 331, 333; Brecher, *Strike!* 226–35; Gallup and Robinson, "American Institute of Public Opinion—Surveys, 1935–38," 379. The auto industry reported "325 sit-down strikes in the City of Detroit alone between November 1, 1936 and December 31, 1937." Cronin, "Sit-Down," 6.

"Strike: Militant 'Trespassers,'" 6; Travis quoted in Fine, *Sit-Down*, 340. For earlier cases of rank-and-file leadership see Staughton Lynd, ed., *"We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

In contrast with 1919, when the AFL's racist disdain for Black workers had facilitated the defeat of a national steel strike. See Cliff Brown and John Brueggemann, "Mobilizing Interracial Solidarity: A Comparison of the 1919 and 1937 Steel Industry Labor Organizing Drives," *Mobilization* 2, no. 1 (1997): 47–70.

Quotes in Gordon, *New Deals*, 226, 227, 233; the 1st quote (226n35) is from an anonymous executive, almost certainly from US Steel. For a similar insider's explanation of US Steel's motivation see Thomas Lamont quoted in Keeran, *Communist Party*, 184. The liberal interpretation attributes US Steel's shift of position to the negative publicity generated by Senator Robert La Follette's Civil Liberties Committee; Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty*, 108–9. However, capitalists' own explanations suggest that the La Follette Committee was of secondary importance, and in any case, the committee likely would not have existed had workers' organizing and militancy not preceded it.

Finegold and Skocpol offer this hypothesis in "State, Party, and Industry," 191n85, citing James Gross and Peter Irons. At least in the case of Gross, the authors misrepresent his argument.

James A. Gross, *The Making of the National Labor Relations Board: A Study in Economics, Politics, and the Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974), 195–230 (quote, 197).

Gross, *Making*, 191, 216, and 225 (Blankenhorn quotes), 226, 227, 228 (court quoted); "Industrial War," 179. Both Blankenhorn and *Fortune* suggest that Roberts may have been influenced by Roosevelt's February 5 proposal to expand the Supreme Court.

Ward's Automotive Reports, June 24, 1939, quoted in Jonathan Cutler, "'To Exercise Control over the Men': Rival Unionism, Corporate Liberalism, and the Wagner Act," unpublished manuscript, 25. Cutler challenges the common assumption that factionalism necessarily weakens a movement. The 2nd quote comes from A.H. Raskin, "The Basic Elements of the Labor Problem" (1948–49?), in National Association of Manufacturers files, box 794, folder 16, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

Cronin, "Sit-Down," 32 (first two quotes); "Union Rivalry Hurts Portland, Ore.," *Business Week*, January 8, 1938, 32; NLRB, *Sixth Annual Report of the National Labor Relations Board: For the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1941* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1942), 21.

Mark R. Wilson, *Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 190–240, esp. 197–98.

"Work Stoppages Caused by Labor-Management Disputes in 1945," *Monthly Labor Review* 62, no. 5 (1946): 720. See also Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW during World War II* (Detroit, MI: Bewick, 1980).

Glaberman, *Wartime*, 4n (Frank Graham quoted), 14 (Roosevelt quoted).

NAM, "The Public and Industrial Peace: A National Labor Policy to Minimize Industrial Strikes" (1946), pp. 8–9, 16, in NAM files, box 961, folder 1, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

See sources in note 5. Auto leaders' postwar overhaul tightened control over workers but at the price of reducing efficiency of resource allocation, which undercut the US industry's global competitiveness. See Murray and Schwartz, *Wrecked*.

"Labor Angles," *Business Week*, August 12, 1939, 33. See also Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Left Out*, esp. 266–96; Goldfield, *Southern Key*; Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986), esp. 63–101. The Left bears some blame here. Davis observes that in the mid-1930s "a fecund synthesis was temporarily achieved between the highly participationist and egalitarian tradition of struggle derived from the Wobblies [the Industrial Workers of the World], and some of the best elements of American Leninism's emphasis on organization, discipline and strategy." However, "this 'synthesis' was only achieved temporarily on a practical plane; no important attempt was made to theorize the lessons of the sitdowns or to appreciate the strategic importance of defending the autonomy and democracy of the shop committees" (60).

Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 155–75 (quote, 164); Katznelson, *Affirmative Action*, 75–76; Davis, *Prisoners*, 91, 97–98. Labor's strategic orientation was just one variable in the success of the capitalist offensive, but it was an important one.

Loomis, *History of America*, 113 (1st quote); Edwin Amenta, Neil Caren, and Sheera Joy Olasky, "Age for Leisure? Political Mediation and the Impact of the Pension Movement on US Old-Age Policy," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 3 (2005): 522 (2nd quote); Theda Skocpol, "Naming the Problem: What It Will Take to Counter Extremism and Engage Americans in the Fight against Global Warming," paper for the Politics of America's Fight against Global Warming symposium, Harvard University, February 14, 2013, p. 11.

Varshini Prakash, "People Power and Political Power," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Prakash and Guido Girgenti (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 142.

Bob Master, "Reviving Labor, in New Deals Old and Green," in Prakash and Girgenti, *Winning*, 270. Master is a legislative and political director with Communication Workers of America.

Prakash, "People Power," 155, citing Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 151.

Goldfield and Melcher, "Myth of Section 7(a)," 61.

See Cronin, "Sit-Down," 6–22. This lengthy and highly polemical tract from the Automobile Manufacturers Association did not mention the 1936 election as a source of inspiration for the sit-down strikers.

Steve Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 67. Fraser also argues that the electoral mobilization of workers preceded the mass labor struggles, which he believes were "inspired" by the NIRA's Section 7(a), a rule that John L. Lewis compared with the Emancipation Proclamation (68). The comparison between those two historic texts is appropriate, but not in the way Lewis and Fraser think. Among the more relevant parallels: both were preceded by years of disruptive and often illegal militancy, both had become "measures of necessity" from the perspective of many elites, and both were intended to contain radicalism. See chap. 3.

Second quote is from Goldfield and Melcher, "Myth of Section 7(a)," 61.

On Lewis see Goldfield and Melcher, "Myth of Section 7(a)," 57–61.

For a similar argument see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 291–321 (quote, 301). Cohen also stresses CIO organizing strategies and the development of workers' class consciousness as a result of their experiences in the 1920s and 1930s. However, she does not fully appreciate the extent to which "the support of the state" (301) was itself a product of nonelectoral forces.

May 15, 1924, column in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, ed. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1965), 80.

"Industrial War," 156; Rosa Lee Swafford, *Wartime Record of Strikes and Lock-Outs, 1940–1945: Study of the Number, Causes and Effects of Strikes during the Period of 1940–1945* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1946), ix, in NAM files, box 794, folder 16, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

Bernstein, *New Deal*, 24 (Lewis paraphrased). Though workers voted in large numbers for Roosevelt, "The labor unions as organizations made virtually no contribution to Roosevelt's victory"; Lewis actually endorsed Hoover. Bernstein, *Lean Years*, 511.

In a difference from most modern-day election campaigns, many organizers in 1936 made clear that shop-floor militancy would be essential regardless of the outcome. Kraus writes that "the conditions under which the auto workers gave support to the Democratic ticket revealed a distinct and healthy departure from the past." In previous elections autoworkers "had waited for others (chiefly Roosevelt) to do what had to be done by themselves." By late 1936, "the sin of dependency had been largely cast off." *Many and the Few*, 41.

John Womack Jr., *Labor Power and Strategy*, ed. Peter Olney and Glenn Perušek (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2023).
RAN, “Our Strategy at Work,” *The Panther* (newsletter mailed to supporters), summer 2023, 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

“The Boycott Road to Rights”

A Lost Weapon against White Supremacists (and Climate Criminals)

THE CAMPAIGN IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, IN APRIL AND MAY 1963 WAS THE MOST crucial turning point in the movement to end formal racial segregation in the United States. In addition to forcing integration in a bastion of white supremacy in the Deep South, the victorious campaign led a timid and accommodationist John F. Kennedy to introduce civil rights legislation in Congress in June, a full twenty-nine months after he had taken office. Though racists were by no means entirely vanquished, Birmingham catalyzed a decisive shift in the balance of power both locally and nationally.

The conventional explanation for this victory is that images of nonviolent Black activists being assaulted by police shocked liberal consciences in the North. By “mobilizing public opinion” on behalf of the movement, the scenes of this “brutality forced the Kennedy administration to intervene.” This interpretation of Birmingham has achieved the status of dogma, influencing countless organizers over the years. Many, including in the climate movement, conclude from Birmingham that by organizing large-scale nonviolent protests with “moral clarity of message,” we can exert an “impact on the nation’s conscience and politics.”[1]

Dogma is often wrong. By stressing the role of public opinion and northern politicians, the conventional explanation misses the deeper reason for the movement’s victory: its ability to disrupt capitalist profits and to sustain that disruption in the face of repression. As this chapter will show, many Black people recognized that the capacity to exert sustained economic pressure was their most potent weapon. This fact was not lost on capitalists, either. In June 1963, *Time* magazine responded to the Birmingham victory with an article titled "The Boycott Road to Rights":

> "The quickest way to a white man's conscience," goes a favorite Negro saying, "is through his pocketbook." This may hit the mark, because the most successful Negro civil rights stratagem so far has been neither sit-in nor lawsuit. Negro leaders, skirting restraint-of-trade laws, call the device "selective buying." It is really a consumer boycott, and it can be devastatingly effective.… In Birmingham, retailers have averaged a $750,000 weekly loss, some because Negro trade boycotted stores, some because whites did not venture downtown for fear of possible violence. "The boycott seems to be moderating," says one businessman. "But it has been effective all right."[2]

The "devastatingly effective" boycott of downtown stores was the centerpiece of the movement's strategy. Beyond Birmingham, boycotts were a central tactic of Black struggle between the mid-1950s and late 1960s. Though the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott is famous, far less known are the many local boycott campaigns that followed it. Montgomery aside, the role of economic disruption has been downplayed or ignored in many accounts of the southern civil rights movement. Yet organizers and their targets knew how effective it could be.[3]

Sometimes the impact of a local boycott was magnified by riots and property destruction. Though these latter tactics were usually condemned by official boycott organizers, they could add to capitalists' sense that policy reform was necessary to restore profitability. In May 1963, working-class Black residents of Birmingham responded to white supremacist bombings and police violence by vandalizing businesses and confronting the cops. As news reports indicated, this atmosphere of "racial tensions" further reduced sales for Birmingham merchants and increased the local business elite's interest in finding a negotiated solution that could avert the "impending disaster to life and property."[4]

This chapter examines the use of economic pressure by the Black freedom movement and the implications for today's climate movement. The first section below examines why Jim Crow segregation and terror in the US South were desirable, or at least acceptable, to business elites in both South and North. Although many capitalists personally disliked Jim Crow laws, they were disinclined to confront them until they were threatened by a disruptive movement that raised the cost of the status quo. The second section illustrates the centrality of boycotts, and economic disruption more generally, to the strategic repertoire of the Black movement. I trace the Birmingham campaign in more detail and show how it influenced both capitalists and political leaders, leading to local desegregation in many spots across the South and then to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

If economic pressure was often "devastatingly effective," why isn't it more central to the strategy of US social movements today? And why is economic pressure all but forgotten in many histories of Black struggle? The third section seeks to explain why movements sometimes turn to boycotts and, conversely, why boycotts have fallen out of favor among mainstream progressive organizations in the twenty-first century—which may itself help explain why economic pressure campaigns are marginalized in most historical retellings. The final section reflects on how today's climate movement might recover this forgotten weapon and deploy it as one key part of a larger disruptive strategy. Some climate organizers are already doing so.

The lessons for the climate movement are similar to those posited in earlier chapters. The movement's success depends largely on its capacity to generate sustained economic disruption, especially through boycott and divestment campaigns targeting banks, insurers, asset managers, and nonfinancial businesses. These campaigns do not need to win over a majority of the public, only a substantial minority of workers and consumers who can press business, labor unions, churches, and local and state governments to turn against fossil fuels and their financial enablers. Nor do the campaigns need to target the entire corporate elite. Once a few powerful targets succumb to movement pressure most of the rest will fall, for reasons explored in other chapters and again below. Focused, sustained economic disruption can unleash a chain reaction that reshapes both business and government policy.

Racism and Capitalist Rationality

In triumphalist narratives of history, racism appears as an irrational vestige of the past, destined to fade away over time as society and legal institutions become more enlightened. By the 1960s racial integration was simply "an idea whose time has come," in the famous words of Senator Everett Dirksen in 1964.[5] Mainstream economists offer a material explanation for this view. In a classic 1957 book, Gary Becker argued that employers in a competitive economy who discriminated against workers, consumers, and business owners of color would suffer lower profits as a result. Capitalists who let racism or any other "non-pecuniary motivation" guide their business decisions would lose out to more enlightened competitors.[6] By this logic the sheer need to maximize profits would eventually erode Jim Crow segregation in the South. The argument is plausible: building two sets of everything is more expensive, and barring certain workers from certain occupations might raise the wages that employers have to pay.

What Becker and his followers ignore is that discrimination also brings benefits for capitalists. Racial or national tensions among workers hinder class unity, helping to safeguard capitalists' economic and political power.[7] Many business owners have been explicit about it. Urban employers in the antebellum South defended their use of enslaved labor as "our only bulwark against extortion and our safeguard against the turbulence of white mechanics as seen in the great strikes, both in England and the North, and it is the only protection we have in any possible struggle between capital and labor."[8] After the war, employers continued to exploit racial and ethnic divisions, to the detriment of white workers as well as Black. The racist disenfranchisement of Black voters after Reconstruction was accompanied by the disenfranchisement of poor whites, which reinforced a starkly unequal class system. In fact, the initial wave of Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement came only in the 1890s, largely as a response to the threat of a class-based movement of poor farmers and workers represented by the Southern Farmers' Alliance and the Agricultural Wheel, which featured partial steps toward Black-white unity.[9] Racial conflict also benefited northern employers. As steel magnates directed their goons during the 1919 national steel strike, "Call up every question you can in reference to racial hatred" as a way of breaking the strike. Employers enlisted the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups for their war against unions in the 1920s.[10]

The benefits for capitalists hold whether or not discrimination takes formal, legal form. Greater wage differentials between workers of different races (one measure of racism) correlate with lower wages for all workers.[11] Even when wage differentials are not significant, capitalists can use racism to hold down wages across the board. Here's one Georgia plantation owner in 1902: "We have white men working on the farms. We frequently have applications every day. But when the white men come and are willing to work we have to say: We cannot afford to pay you any more because I can get a negro for 60 cents a day; if you are willing to work at that price the first vacancy we have you can get it. We occasionally put a white man on that way."[12] Most employers are not so explicit or even so intentional. The persistence of racism, with all its benefits for capitalists, depends much less on deliberate scheming than on the capitalist system itself. The inherent precariousness of workers' position within capitalism creates incentives for racial and ethnic solidarity as a strategy "for protection from the maelstrom."[13]

If racial hierarchy was in some ways inefficient for southern capitalists, it was also highly efficient. The balance of costs and benefits was very difficult to weigh in any quantitative sense, leaving the net impact of discrimination ambiguous or even positive in most employers' eyes. Even where southern capitalists had initially opposed formal segregation in the late nineteenth century, they soon came to defend it. By the early 1900s they saw Jim Crow and Black disenfranchisement as fully compatible with economic prosperity. "Segregation was modern and progressive, an integral part of the New South creed," observes historian Gavin Wright.[14] Furthermore, the potential short-term disruption stemming from integration of workplaces and retail centers—including from white customers and workers steeped in the racist ideology that earlier capitalists had done so much to propagate—was an additional disincentive to integration. After several generations of such a system, very few capitalists could be expected to voluntarily integrate unless subjected to pressure from workers, consumers, investors, or some other external force.

Most of those external forces were not inclined to act. Northern capital gave no indication that it would exert economic pressure for integration in the South. Liberal Democratic politicians, meanwhile, were not about to confront Jim Crow for fear of antagonizing the powerful southern wing of the party. The Kennedy brothers kept the southern courts stacked with white supremacists, appointing federal judges who ruled consistently against integration, acquitted white terrorists, and publicly referred to Black people as "chimpanzees" and the N-word. As late as February 1963 John F. Kennedy's official civil rights platform continued to defer to southern white supremacists. The administration pledged merely "to continue to encourage and support action by state and local communities, and private entrepreneurs, to assure all members of the public equal access to all public accommodations." It was hardly a "profile in courage."[15]

Nor was public opinion on the side of southern Black people. The southern white public unfailingly elected segregationists. The northern white public was divided over segregation and did not assign the problem much importance. Although World War II liberalized white opinion somewhat, most whites in the 1940s and 1950s believed that Black people in the United States were "being treated fairly." Most favored only a gradual process of racial integration and opposed confrontational tactics like freedom rides, sit-ins, and mass marches in the South. Nearly two-thirds of the public opposed the 1963 March on Washington. As late as 1964, fully 74 percent thought that "mass demonstrations by Negroes are more likely to hurt the Negro's cause for racial equality."[16]

Segregation would not naturally crumble under the pressures of capitalist modernization. It would not be voted away by the majority. It would not be overturned through the initiative of northern politicians or liberal judges. Its demise would depend, first and foremost, on Black people's ability to impose costs on the southern and northern capitalists who had the leverage to impose integration on the rest of the white power structure.

"If the Corporate Elite Chose to Act, Things Would Change"

Many Black organizers reached that conclusion in the 1950s. The mainstream civil rights strategy before 1955 was litigation, spearheaded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and made possible by the courageous testimony of Black plaintiffs. Those lawsuits helped produce the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling against school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The inadequacy of the court ruling quickly became clear, however, as enforcement was minimal and remained slow even after federal intervention in Little Rock in 1957. Black people were completely excluded from formal political power in the South, while the federal government was unwilling to enforce desegregation in a consistent way. These circumstances convinced many Black people that a more creative and confrontational approach was necessary.

The one elite sector not impervious to their pressure were capitalists. Furthermore, capitalists had the power to coerce the more recalcitrant white supremacists into compliance. The Birmingham chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) noted this power relationship in 1963: "Why can the city of Birmingham abrogate the US Constitution with impunity? One of the reasons is that the most powerful men in the country are willing that they should. Ten US corporations employ over 35 percent of the manufacturing workers of Birmingham. The directors of these corporations are among the top corporate elite of America. If they chose to act to change things in Birmingham, things would change."[17]

Martin Luther King Jr. made the same point later that year when he explained why the Birmingham movement had decided to target business owners. "If you can pull them around, you pull the political power structure because really the political power structure listens to the economic power structure."[18] These statements from SNCC and King reflected the collective knowledge produced by the movement. Over the previous decade Black organizers had developed the economic pressure strategy through their own trial-and-error processes and their study of other social movements. As litigation and lobbying proved inadequate, they decided to target the economic power structure. Key reference points included a short bus boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953, the famous Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56, and a proliferation of local boycotts in the years thereafter.[19]

Montgomery is especially significant since the victory contributed to the Supreme Court's December 1956 ruling against bus segregation and also inspired other boycotts. Neither Rosa Parks's act of defiance on December 1, 1955, nor the 381-day boycott that followed were spontaneous. Parks was a longtime organizer. E.D. Nixon, who bailed her out of jail, was a veteran labor and civil rights organizer. As for the boycott, according to Montgomery organizer Thelma Glass, "We had all the plans and we were just waiting for the right time.… It was planned years in advance before it actually came to fruition."[20] The preexisting organization of the Montgomery Black community facilitated the logistical efforts necessary to sustain the boycott, from carpooling to the mutual aid provided to Black workers who were fired in retaliation.

Success in Montgomery inspired imitation by Black organizers across the South. When the sit-in movement spread in early 1960, it was accompanied by boycotts. *Business Week* reported that local movements were increasingly using this "economic weapon to fight segregation," with meticulous "planning and organization."[21]

> "This thing has frightening ramifications. It is more serious than many people realize. It has now become an economic situation affecting the entire community, the whole city, and the whole country." With these words a top retail executive in Nashville described to a *Business Week* reporter last week the Negro boycott in progress there against downtown stores. As he spoke, Negroes all across the South were mobilizing this economic weapon as part of the intensified struggle against segregation and economic discrimination that started with a student lunch counter demonstration in Greensboro, N.C. last February.… Since then, boycotts have been organized and carried out in many Southern cities, and in other cities plans are under way to initiate them.

The same story commented on the organizing strategy. When preparing a boycott in Jackson, Mississippi, organizers "went from door to door in Negro areas explaining the plan," personally speaking with an estimated 7,000 families. They distributed 10,500 flyers and followed up with "personal calls." Such local organizing was amplified when national leaders publicized the idea. In April, Martin Luther King Jr. "called for a nationwide 'selective buying' campaign among Negroes."

Business Week also elaborated on why economic pressure was so powerful. The formal boycotts were not the only threat: "These campaigns are only part of a massive assault on segregation that includes continued use of sit-ins, picketing, and other demonstrations.… In many cities in the South these activities are generating great social unrest that is also having a noticeable impact on business. Merchants in several cities, for example, ascribe loss of sales not only to specific Negro boycotts but also to the tense atmosphere that keeps people, Negro and white, away from downtown and their stores." This "tense atmosphere" compounded the impacts of the organized boycotts because it deterred white customers as well as Black. It also stood to affect more than just the retail stores. In Nashville, a "prominent merchant" reported that "not only retailers, but real estate owners, banks, and others are concerned over the situation and its possible continuance or spread." Among other dangers, outside investment could be scared away. A Mississippi newspaper editor warned that while nonsouthern capitalists were happy to invest in segregated states, they did avoid places "where social and political conditions are unstable."

As *Business Week* observed, boycott organizers aimed not only to force businesses to integrate but also to get the businesses to impose changes on government. In some cities, boycott organizers explicitly recognized "that businessmen's influence extends beyond their stores." By targeting racist business owners, they sought "to force city officials to listen to Negro demands." An unnamed Black organizer in Birmingham (possibly Fred Shuttlesworth) "explained that a new organization was being formed to bring pressure on five downtown stores, to get the store owners to use influence with the city to repeal a stringent antitrespass ordinance that Negroes regard as dangerous to them." This was the same strategic logic later expressed by SNCC and King.

In 1956 Shuttlesworth and other Birmingham organizers had established a grassroots group, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR).[22] The ACMHR was affiliated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), but it exercised autonomy over its own strategy and was funded mostly by its own members. Between 1956 and 1963 Shuttlesworth and colleagues organized various boycotts and became known for breathtakingly courageous acts of civil disobedience in the face of terrorist violence. Meanwhile the ACMHR membership expanded, making the group one of the most important "movement centers" in the South by the early 1960s. Its organizational strength was a prerequisite for the successful 1963 campaign. Though popular mythology holds that King and the SCLC had chosen Birmingham because they hoped to create a spectacle of violent repression, the real reason was the ACMHR's well-organized and combative membership.[23]

Organizers understood that the best way to catalyze national political change was not to send lobbyists to Washington but to win a decisive local victory. By defeating white supremacists in one key citadel they could, in King's words, "set forces in motion to change the entire course of the drive for freedom and justice" and "break the back of segregation all over the nation." As Shuttlesworth later said, "We were trying to launch a systematic, wholehearted battle against segregation which would set the pace for the nation."[24] This strategy is reminiscent of auto union organizers' assault on General Motors in 1936, detailed in the previous chapter.

Finding the right strategy was also crucial to the movement's success. In the previous big desegregation campaign, in Albany, Georgia, in 1961–62, the primary strategy had entailed pressuring city officials. Local organizers had also targeted merchants and bus lines, but King's SCLC chose not to prioritize the economic pressure campaign. This was a mistake. The failure in Albany informed King's power analysis: "All our marches in Albany were marches to the city hall trying to make them negotiate, where if we had centered our protests at the stores, the businesses in the city, [we could have] made the merchants negotiate.… If you can pull them around, you pull the political power structure because really the political power structure listens to the economic power structure."[25]

SCLC national leaders, the ACMHR, and the local SNCC branch applied this lesson in Birmingham in 1963. They meticulously researched boycott targets and timed the April 3 launch to coincide with the Easter shopping season. One of King's advisers, Wyatt Walker, recalled, "We decided we would concentrate on the ebb and flow of the money downtown." Since capitalists were at once the most vulnerable and most powerful members of the white power structure, they could be expected to yield in the face of sustained economic disruption and to compel government officials to do the same. As local organizer Abraham Woods said, “We had the pressure on [the merchants] in order that they might pressure the city.”[26] The demands included not only things within the merchants’ direct power to control—desegregation of downtown stores and nondiscriminatory hiring practices—but also city policies including desegregation of schools and public areas and the dismissal of charges against arrested demonstrators.[27] SNCC promoted a complementary boycott of national firms, guided by its logic that if “the top corporate elite of America” decided “to change things in Birmingham, things would change.” Thus, unlike in Albany, the key organizations were all committed to the economic pressure approach, consisting of a well-organized boycott plus mass marches and sit-ins that further scared away customers. The “devastatingly effective” result, as *Time* later reported, was several million dollars in losses for downtown business owners over a five-week period. Some merchants reported that sales had declined by up to 50 percent.[28]

Figure 11: Bull Connor orders police to arrest Black demonstrators as they promote the boycott of segregationist businesses in Birmingham, April 10, 1963. (AP)

Birmingham capitalists did not give in right away. A month into the campaign, most still hoped that the troublemakers would be imprisoned, “that the demonstrations would fizzle in time,” and that customers would soon return.[29] These expectations were logical based on past experience. A boycott a year earlier had failed. During the first week of May, however, it became clear that the movement was not fading and that, on the contrary, police repression was only intensifying the disruption to the business environment. This trajectory was a testament to the movement’s own resiliency and tactical ingenuity, which reflected the local organizing foundation established by the ACMHR since 1956, the lessons learned from past battles, and the movement’s ability to unite around a common strategy. Those qualities allowed the movement to withstand repression rather than collapsing in demoralization. For instance, the strategy of filling the jails limited the cops’ ability to make mass arrests, which is what led the public safety commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor, to deploy dogs and fire hoses against marchers in early May. The movement’s ability to continue mustering large turnouts for protests, even after 2,500 people were in jail, added to elites’ sense that the standard tactics of repression were no longer viable.[30]

Figure 12: Some northern organizers held solidarity actions during the Birmingham campaign. This April 20, 1963, protest was organized by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in New York City and targeted Woolworth, a major retailer that operated in both North and South. (Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University)

That perception was heightened by the federal judiciary's refusal to grant the city's request for an injunction against protests. This was another contrast with Albany, where white supremacists had secured a federal injunction and King had chosen to obey it.[31] Strong movements can defy injunctions, but the risks are significant and the issuance of one can easily split a movement, as it did in Albany. The absence of a federal injunction was thus a notable advantage in Birmingham. Rather than an act of liberal benevolence, the federal judiciary's stance needs to be understood as the product of decades of litigation by the NAACP and other forces, which induced a slow shift against southern segregation and terror. Though the NAACP was a relatively conservative force in the movement, its legalistic approach was an important complement to more disruptive strategies.

Faced with sustained disruption and the failure of repression, local business elites and some northern business leaders capitulated. In Birmingham it was the "merchants, industrialists, corporation and bank presidents, [and] prominent insurance and real-estate men" who were quickest to respond, as movement negotiator Vincent Harding recalled. Compared with the planter aristocracy, these sectors were much more dependent on local consumers and outside investment, and thus more vulnerable to the breakdown of the urban business environment.[32] Their position was reflected in the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce's "Senior Citizens Committee," whose membership was filled with prominent local business elites. On May 7 the committee appointed a team to negotiate desegregation with the movement directly, bypassing the city government. The lead negotiator was local real-estate tycoon Sidney Smyer, whose company "essentially controlled downtown," as his cousin later wrote. Explaining later why local business leaders agreed to desegregation, Smyer recalled that "it was a dollar-and-cents thing. If we're going to have a good business in Birmingham, we better change our way of living." Smyer himself was a staunch racist who had attended rallies of the local Citizens' Council, the genteel counterpart to the Ku Klux Klan. His resumé also included leadership roles in the Dixiecrat campaign of 1948 and the American States Rights Association. Yet his desire to restore profitability outweighed his ideological commitment to segregation. "I'm still a segregationist," he told a reporter in mid-May, but "I'm not a damn fool."[33]

The agreement that negotiators privately reached on the evening of May 7 met with the expected resistance. Connor and his forces tried to sabotage it before it was made public. When the committee nonetheless publicized the deal on May 10, the Klan responded the next day by bombing the home of King's brother and the motel where King was staying. In response many Black residents rioted the night of May 11–12, ignoring the pleas of official movement leaders. The rioting reinforced business leaders' own fears of "impending disaster to life and property" and their commitment to imposing desegregation on the political establishment as a way of restoring stability. It was clear that continued repression would only radicalize the Black masses. The same logic led the Kennedy administration to mobilize federal troops after the bombings, thus guaranteeing that the May 7 agreement would stand. It too viewed the agreement as the best way to reestablish order and to prevent more radical leaders like Malcolm X from gaining mass Black support.[34]

The Birmingham victory confirmed that government leaders take orders from business leaders. By creating ongoing disruption, the movement had forced capitalists to change their own practices and to force those changes on city and state officials. Bull Connor complained that "I would have beaten King" if not for "those damn merchants."[35] The chaos also compelled the dithering Kennedy administration to finally intervene in a strong way. Had the movement's strategy focused on lobbying Kennedy and promising to support his reelection, it would have failed miserably. The administration was moved not by moral indignation or even electoral considerations, but rather by the manifest chaos of the situation. According to Aldon Morris, a leading scholar of the Birmingham movement, "The intervention of the federal government was a response to the widespread breakdown of economic and social order in Birmingham rather than to mere violence against the protesters." Andrew Young of the SCLC made a similar point, saying that "Bull Connor made the impact greater, but the dynamics would have taken effect without Bull Connor and the dogs.… When the demonstrators were so massive and the economic withdrawal program was so tight, the town was paralyzed."[36] We might add that the paralysis was intensified by the terrorist backlash and the Black lower class's ensuing turn toward disruptive tactics not sanctioned by civil rights organizations.

Figure 13: This April 8, 1968, march in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was held in response to King's assassination. As the sign suggests, organized consumer pressure was a central weapon of Black freedom movements in the South. "Burning" was condemned by most civil rights organizations, though it sometimes amplified the disruption that led business elites to favor concessions. (Mississippi Department of Archives and History; photo by Winfred Moncrief)

The consequences of this local victory reverberated far beyond Birmingham. Immediately, success inspired Black people elsewhere to confront their oppressors. The Department of Justice reported that "between mid-May and the end of the year" there were "2,062 other civil rights demonstrations in 315 cities in 40 states." Birmingham also emboldened more activists to disregard judicial injunctions. For SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), "defying injunctions became standard operating procedure."[37] This surge of militancy continued thereafter. Learning from Birmingham, many local movements made economic pressure central to their strategy. They sought to "put our dollar power to work as they did in

Birmingham" (see figure 14). Boycotts sometimes succeeded where other approaches had failed. In Greenwood, Mississippi, the shift from targeting politicians to targeting businesses resulted in direct progress on desegregation and hiring. As historian Charles Payne writes, "most Greenwood activists feel strongly that the immediate cause of real change, change that they could feel in their daily lives, came in response to economic pressure." In this tumultuous atmosphere, the mere threat of economic disruption was often enough to get local business elites across the South to push for integration.[38]

To all who boycotted the schools on October 22nd . . .
To all who want quality, integrated education in Chicago . . .

LET'S PUT OUR DOLLAR POWER TO WORK FOR INTEGRATION

STOP! DON'T SHOP DOWNTOWN

Even after the great Freedom Day school boycott, most of the school board remains firmly against integration. Ben Willis is still the boss, and school board President Clair Roddewig continues to show his contempt for the school integration movement. Now we must take further action.

WE MUST PUT OUR DOLLAR POWER TO WORK AS THEY DID IN BIRMINGHAM

Downtown merchants and business leaders helped keep Willis in power. Some of them publicized their actions. Others reportedly worked behind the scenes. Why should you spend your dollars in their stores, shops, restaurants and theaters? Let the business men know that **we** mean business! If they have the power to keep Willis, they also have the power to insist on his removal and on a policy of integration in our schools. **Let them hear our voices through the silence of their cash registers.**

DON'T SHOP IN THE LOOP

Urge your friends to support this civil rights action!

DON'T SHOP DOWNTOWN UNTIL WILLIS GOES! *INTEGRATION NOW!*

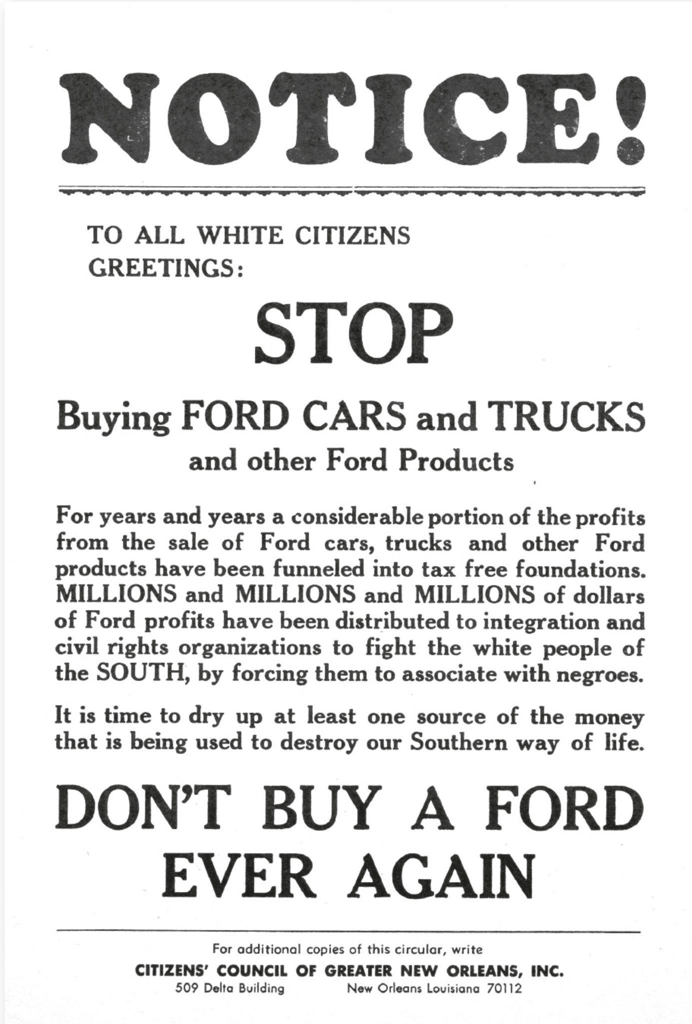
Sponsors of the "Stop! Don't Shop Downtown" campaign: Initiated by Chicago Area Friends of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee)

CO-SPONSORS (Partial List)—
Baptist Ministers Conference of Chicago and Vicinity
Chatham-Avalon Park Community Council
Committee to End Discrimination in Chicago Medical Institutions
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
Ecumenical Institute
Interracial Council of Methodists
Negro American Labor Council
Non-Partisan Coordinating Committee
Parents Council for Integrated Schools
Protest At The Polls
Teachers for Integrated Schools
South Side CORE

360

For further information call 268-5077

Figure 14: Victory in Birmingham inspired emulation across the country, including in the North. This 1963 flyer was circulated by Chicago Area Friends of SNCC.
(Wikimedia Commons)


NOTICE!

TO ALL WHITE CITIZENS
GREETINGS:

STOP

Buying FORD CARS and TRUCKS
and other Ford Products

For years and years a considerable portion of the profits from the sale of Ford cars, trucks and other Ford products have been funneled into tax free foundations. MILLIONS and MILLIONS and MILLIONS of dollars of Ford profits have been distributed to integration and civil rights organizations to fight the white people of the SOUTH, by forcing them to associate with negroes.

It is time to dry up at least one source of the money that is being used to destroy our Southern way of life.

DON'T BUY A FORD
EVER AGAIN

For additional copies of this circular, write
CITIZENS' COUNCIL OF GREATER NEW ORLEANS, INC.
509 Delta Building New Orleans Louisiana 70112

Figure 15: White supremacists often targeted businesses that had capitulated to the movement with counterboycotts, but these efforts incurred business opposition and failed to reverse the shift toward integration. (Wikimedia Commons)

Birmingham and the contagious militancy it inspired also produced federal action. On May 31 President Kennedy finally decided to seek civil rights legislation. The causation was obvious. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy wrote that the bill "is designed to alleviate some of the principal causes of the serious and unsettling racial unrest now prevailing in many of the states," which he predicted would "get worse during the summer." Another Justice Department official likened his colleagues to "firemen" who were "trying to put out a big fire at the same time we were trying to set up a permanent code of safety regulations to abolish fire."[39] In a June 22 meeting in which he tried to stop civil rights leaders from marching in Washington, President Kennedy nevertheless admitted "that the demonstrations in the streets had brought results, they had made the executive branch act faster and were now forcing Congress to entertain legislation which a few weeks before would have had no chance," as reported by his assistant Arthur Schlesinger. Kennedy was responding to massive economic and social disruption, not to lobbying or the prospect of electoral gains. In fact, his administration expected the civil rights bill to cost the Democrats votes. "The President never had any illusions about the political advantages of equal rights," wrote Schlesinger, "but he saw no alternative."[40] Shuttlesworth, King, and other orchestrators of the Birmingham campaign were proved right: the victory had "set forces in motion" that would "break the back of segregation all over the nation."

The congressional prospects were still uncertain when Kennedy sent his bill to Capitol Hill. Indeed, segregationist senators launched an eighty-three-day filibuster against it. However, their power was neutralized by two external forces. One was the growing business support for federally mandated integration. Not only was there virtually no organized capitalist resistance, segments of big business like the retail chains protested some of the weaknesses in Kennedy's bill. By summer 1963 some executives thought it might "be better to have federal law to force everyone to drop the color bars and get it over with fast. Better than piecemeal, some doing it, others not." In addition, southern business leaders who had capitulated became crucial in disciplining southern politicians, police, school administrators, and holdout businesses. In a July 1964 report on "Why the South Took Rights Law Quietly," *Business Week* wrote that urban "business and civic groups have provided the leadership needed to win peaceful compliance with the law."[41] The high visibility of white supremacists' resistance, from the filibuster to counterboycotts to ongoing terrorism, can obscure the fact that by 1964 southern politicians had largely yielded to their economic masters. Segregationist boycotts intimidated some small businesses but never grew strong enough to reverse the tide, and business sometimes took concerted action to squelch them.[42] Even the opposition in Congress was largely performative. *Business Week* commented that protests against the civil rights bill in the House “lacked the fiery rancor that marked previous civil rights debates.” The Senate debate was also “marked by a lack of rancor between factions, indicating, perhaps, that Southern opponents long ago accepted the fact that there would be a bill.”[43]

The second force that helped neutralize resistance to the civil rights bill was the continuation and feared radicalization of Black protest. Kennedy in June 1963 had concluded that civil rights legislation was necessary, in Schlesinger’s words, “in order to prevent the final isolation of the [current] Negro leadership and the embitterment of the Negro people. Every day that summer new and ominous tendencies seemed to appear in the colored masses,” including angry Black rebukes against leaders, including King, who were perceived as too timid or too close to white elites. If government did not deliver moderate legislative reforms, the colored masses might be seduced by “the mindless radicalism of the Negro militants.”[44] The same fear was widespread in Congress. In May 1964 *Business Week* reported on “underlying fears among many senators that, if there has not been at least a cloture vote by the time schools recess in June, chances of violent civil rights disturbances will increase.” Over the previous year the movement showed “a growing ferment,” including ongoing demonstrations and “a whole new set of demands” that “run the gamut from better housing, to an end of de facto segregation in schools in heavily negro areas in major cities, to protests about ‘police brutality.’” Although these demands were not in fact new, they were now being embraced, and acted upon, by more Black people. The growth of militancy in turn “put growing pressure on leaders of more traditional Negro groups” like the NAACP, which was inching toward bolder demands and more confrontational tactics.[45]

The shift in capitalists’ position also facilitated subsequent reforms, including the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act that launched the “War on Poverty” and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Federal antipoverty funding flowed most heavily to southern counties where the Black movement had been strong in the early 1960s. Many business elites advocated welfare programs as a way of ensuring economic and social stability.[46] The fundamental cause of these reforms was the proliferation of economically disruptive movements that shifted the balance of forces among elites, starting at the local level and ratcheting upward to the national. Those movements had "set forces in motion to change the entire course of the drive for freedom and justice," just as King and others had hoped.[47]

The Adoption and Rejection of Economic Pressure Strategies

Because they are both nonviolent and disruptive, boycotts sometimes unite liberals and radicals. Boycotts in Montgomery, Birmingham, and elsewhere succeeded because Black clergy agreed to promote the campaigns and because middle-class and working-class Black consumers overwhelmingly supported them. The famous boycotts of the United Farm Workers (UFW) featured a similar tactical unity.[48]

However, unity became more elusive for the Black movement after 1963. After Birmingham, middle-class Black leaders prioritized "political" action, by which they meant elections and lobbying. It was time to shift "from protest to politics," said the "leading tactician" of the movement, Bayard Rustin, in 1965. Rather than disrupting "lunch counters," Rustin argued, the movement should set its sights on "political institutions," by which he meant the formal institutions of government.[49] Martin Luther King Jr. got a cold response from Rustin and other advisers that year when he proposed an "escalated economic withdrawal" targeting Alabama as a way to combat "the reign of terror which presently grips the state."[50] By the late 1960s liberals who had supported economic disruption in the early 1960s had turned to election campaigns. This logic continues to shape much Black political activity today.[51] Across the broader world of liberal and progressive activism, the dominant assumption is that the best way to achieve change is by working in the electoral and legislative sphere. Strikes are rare. Organized boycott campaigns, the "devastatingly effective" weapon of the Black movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, are today rarely attempted in any serious way and are almost never supported by mainstream activist organizations or unions.

Given this historical trajectory, it is important to understand how and why movement organizations first embraced economic pressure tactics and later abandoned them. Several factors influenced middle-class Black leaders' embrace of boycotts during the Jim Crow era. First, there was no illusion of political rights or electoral power, even for wealthier Black people, and even those who tried to work through existing institutions were repressed. After the *Brown v. Board* decision southern states waged war against the NAACP. Members were barred from public employment and membership lists were seized. This repression made it "practically impossible" for Black southerners to "pursue an effective bureaucratic legal strategy."[52] With institutional channels closed, those who wanted justice (and who wanted to maintain legitimacy among their base) had no choice but to support more confrontational measures. Unity around those measures had been "not so much a matter of conscious choice as the result of objective necessity," as Rustin later wrote.[53]

After institutional channels finally opened, if partially, through the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Black middle class eschewed disruptive strategies and prioritized electoral and legislative politics. Those who supported more militant approaches were accused of alienating the movement's newfound "allies," including politicians and voters, and of thus jeopardizing the emergent "coalition of progressive forces" that was necessary for "political" progress. King's own view—that "I don't think in a social revolution you can always retain support of the moderates"—put him at odds with other SCLC officials and advisers. That falling-out only accelerated as he began denouncing US capitalism and empire. As King moved left, most other middle-class leaders moved right.[54]

A similar pattern characterizes the history of most labor and progressive movements. When there is formal political inclusion for an oppressed group, even if it offers scant real power for all but the more privileged members, the latter will show a strong preference for institutional strategies.[55] That orientation is reinforced by a range of legal, financial, and ideological constraints that have become more acute in the age of neoliberal economics and nonprofit organizations. Myriad laws restrict the disruptive power of unions and other nonprofit organizations. For those not funded by their membership base, reliance on external funding is an extra disincentive to militancy.[56] Few labor or nonprofit leaders question the hegemonic common sense that we mustn't alienate anyone by defying laws or court orders.

Despite these developments, there is ample evidence that economic pressure can still play a powerful role in today's movements. In 2010 the Arizona state legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 1070, an omnibus anti-immigrant bill whose most infamous provision required racial profiling by police. In 2012, the US Supreme Court upheld that requirement. Yet by 2016 the law had been gutted. The reason was that a boycott of Arizona had spurred the state's capitalists to demand an end to anti-immigrant laws. Dozens of cities, counties, and educational institutions outside Arizona had boycotted the state. Revenue from tourism and convention hosting declined, Arizona businesses lost contracts with outside municipalities, and many Mexican companies stopped doing business with Arizona companies. In March 2011, dozens of corporate leaders in Arizona wrote that the boycott had been so "harmful to our image" that "Arizona-based businesses saw contracts cancelled or were turned away from bidding," and "sales outside of the state declined." The direct economic impact of the boycott was relatively small. But the prospect of continued losses in sales, and of the emigration of undocumented workers to neighboring states, scared businesses enough to change their posture. A week after their letter, the Republican-dominated legislature voted down five new anti-immigrant bills. The Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, which had remained "neutral" on SB 1070 at the time of passage, became a strong opponent of future bills that could ostracize Arizona. In 2020, the Republican governor of Arizona abandoned his legislative attack on sanctuary cities after the chamber and other business interests "acted rapidly" to express their displeasure, according to the chamber's president.[57]

Implications for the Climate Movement

This chapter has highlighted how movements can wield political power through economic disruption, including but not limited to boycott campaigns. Economic pressure can change the behavior of capitalists and, because "the political power structure listens to the economic power structure," it can also lead to changes in government policy. This approach is often effective where other strategies have failed. Focusing on one or a few powerful targets can "set forces in motion to change the entire course" of a struggle. The chain reaction that follows is a result of three principal forces: (1) a localized victory inspires oppressed people elsewhere to confront additional targets, (2) some elites embrace preemptive reform to avoid disruption, and (3) the elites who are first to capitulate then seek to impose uniform government policies across the board. Birmingham set all three forces in motion.

There are several ways the climate movement might apply this lesson. Coordinated campaigns of "selective buying" could reward businesses that support government climate reforms and take meaningful action to cut their own emissions, while punishing those that do not (this of course requires close monitoring due to corporate greenwashing). These campaigns could happen at all levels, from the local to the international. Entire states and countries in which fossil fuel interests and political representatives block climate reforms could be targeted with boycotts, which could force other capitalists in those places to press their politicians to adopt reforms. Although the boycott victories of the civil rights era were local campaigns, other examples like Arizona and the UFW boycotts demonstrate that boycotts can also succeed at broader levels and can draw the participation of large swaths of the public, not just those who are immediately impacted by an oppressive policy. The closest parallel in the current climate movement are the divestment campaigns. These have typically targeted fossil fuel companies but have expanded in the last decade to also include financial institutions like banks, insurers, and asset managers. As chapter 2 noted, financial institutions have begun to feel real pressure. With broader participation from progressive and liberal institutions, boycott and divestment campaigns could seriously harm the fossil fuel industry's access to funding and insurance. Achieving that participation is an uphill struggle given liberal leaders' aversion to economic pressure strategies, but campaigns initiated by more independent forces can often move the cautious mainstream leaders to embrace more assertive approaches, as shown by the history of the NAACP in the 1950s and 1960s.

A second lesson of the civil rights victories is that economic disruption campaigns must be organized. Boycotts are most effective when carefully planned and promoted. The sporadic boycott attempts of today are typically half-hearted affairs involving little beyond mass emails or social media posts. By contrast, the boycotts of the 1950s and 1960s involved serious education, outreach, and logistical work, in addition to inspiring songs and speeches that fortified Black people for the long struggle. Building sustainable organizations and networks was crucial since most of the successful campaigns did not succeed quickly. In general, only when elites believed that the pain would continue indefinitely and that the "colored masses" might turn more radical did they capitulate to a movement. In Birmingham, the expectation that the campaign "would fizzle in time" led business leaders to hold out for over a month. When the disruption continued to escalate and repression failed, they conceded. Organization helped the movement sustain the pressure and withstand the repression. Similarly, the climate movement's targets will capitulate when they are convinced things will get worse if they don't. To mount that kind of threat, we need more organizers who can build and sustain campaigns targeting the institutions over which we have some potential power: banks, insurers, employers, and all the secondary institutions that have some leverage over those targets, including our labor unions, churches, pension funds, and municipal and state governments.

How a boycott is organized also matters—whom it recruits and empowers, how internal decisions are made, the way the boycott is or isn't used in conjunction with other tactics, and so on. The historic boycotts in Montgomery, Birmingham, and elsewhere were driven by the mass participation of those oppressed by the system. King and other official leaders were always constrained by what their base demanded. This is not always the case. A danger of boycotts, particularly when waged at larger scales, is their tendency to center sympathetic consumers rather than the people most directly affected by an oppressive institution. Although the national UFW boycotts of the 1960s and 1970s were well organized and quite successful in pressuring companies, they diverted resources away from organizing field workers. That strategic decision created further distance between the rank and file and the UFW leadership. This problem might have been mitigated had UFW leaders been more committed to rank-and-file democracy. Unfortunately, the boycotts became a substitute for worker organizing.[58]

The climate movement is different in that almost all of us are directly harmed by fossil fuels. Yet we still need to be vigilant about how, and whom, we prioritize. The mobilization of middle-class consumers to boycott and divest should reinforce, never replace, movement-building work with and among workers, Indigenous communities, poor neighborhoods harmed by toxic emissions, and Global South peoples. We need organizations that foster broad participation while also giving people decision-making power "in proportion to the degree they are affected" by the problem.[59] Movements that do so tend to be more powerful and resilient.

A further lesson of this chapter is one spotlighted in earlier chapters: a movement that operates primarily outside the electoral sphere does not need majority support to win. Climate boycott and divestment campaigns do not need to reduce their targets' sales to zero; they only need to muster support from a significant minority of the population. Black people were a minority of the Birmingham population, but organizers calculated that "the Negro population had sufficient buying power so that its withdrawal could make the difference between profit and loss for many businesses."[60] Even in the North public opinion was not favorable to the protesters' tactics in the early 1960s. Only later did majority opinion swing decisively in favor of the movement. That subsequent shift was important since it probably mitigated the later rollback of civil rights reforms. But the movement did not temper its own militancy to avoid "alienating" the white majority. The priority public that it sought to recruit was the Black public plus whatever small percentage of non-Black people might get on board. That choice paid off. Not only did the movement win, the white public was not alienated as much as most observers predicted.[61]

A related lesson concerns the role of property destruction and small-scale violence, which are almost universally assumed to alienate the public. Although many civil rights organizers insisted that those tactics were detrimental to the movement, elite reactions tell a more complicated story. Birmingham's business leaders were clear that it was not just the boycott and sit-ins that disrupted their profits, but also the broader atmosphere of “racial tensions”—including riots in response to Klan terrorism, which risked “disaster to life and property”—that threatened their profits. National politicians responded similarly. Insider accounts from 1963–64 make clear that the Civil Rights Act was partly propelled by a fear of “new and ominous tendencies” among “the colored masses,” including the radicalization of both demands and tactics.

Much recent research questions the dogmatic reverence for nonviolence found in many progressive circles. For example, scholars note that many civil rights organizers of the 1950s and early 1960s (including Martin Luther King Jr. himself) owned guns for protection.[62] If we look at movements around the world, vandalism and small-scale “unarmed collective violence”—for instance, throwing rocks—are sometimes associated with success. Furthermore, rioters do not scare away others from getting involved in nonviolent mobilization.[63] By the same token, however, the historical record should caution us against any romanticization of violent resistance. Such tactics are likely to incur more intense repression, both physical and legal, and to facilitate militarization that negatively reshapes the terrain for future struggles. While the riots and armed mobilizations of the late 1960s forced some concessions from elites, they also facilitated a draconian turn in policy. Movements must carefully weigh the strategic costs and benefits of any tactic they employ or endorse. Blanket generalizations about the efficacy of “violent” versus “nonviolent” resistance are unjustified.

This debate may become more central to the climate movement as ecological breakdown intensifies. For now, its relevance is mostly limited to debates about property destruction—whether we should sabotage oil and gas pipelines, for example. The moral justification for such actions is indisputable. The strategic value is more ambiguous. Successful vandalism may impose costs on fossil fuel companies, for instance by raising security and repair costs for the companies. But is it more disruptive to the industry than other uses of our collective energy? And does it elicit elite reactions that undermine efforts to build a mass movement? There is no easy answer to these questions.[64]

However, the basic objectives guiding our strategy should be clear: we need a growing movement that can inflict sustained disruption on the fossil fuel industry and its enablers. That means building strong organizations that can educate, agitate, and mobilize people over the long haul, and that are simultaneously flexible and democratic enough to embrace new ideas when the old are not working. The most militant tactics are not necessarily the most disruptive. Litigation is a major source of disruption for fossil fuel companies, just as it was for segregationists. Divestment campaigns can threaten financial solvency, and to this point they have certainly been more disruptive than the occasional acts of vandalism. This is not to say that more "radical" tactics don't have a role to play. Scattered bands of pipeline saboteurs might be helpful. But they are no substitute for a growing movement capable of sustained disruption.

Quotes from, respectively, Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Yohuru Williams, *Rethinking the Black Freedom Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 34; Varshini Prakash, "People Power and Political Power," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Prakash and Guido Girgenti (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 151.

"The Boycott Road to Rights," *Time*, June 7, 1963, 95.

As Charles Payne comments of the civil rights movement, "Economic pressure was more important than most histories suggest." "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches," in Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 117. Almost alone among scholars of Birmingham, Aldon Morris has emphasized the movement's capacity to generate economic disruption through boycotting and other measures. See his article "Birmingham Confrontation Reconsidered: An Analysis of the Dynamics and Tactics of Mobilization," *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 5 (1993): 621–36, plus his book *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), esp. 250–74.

Claude Sitton, "Birmingham Pact Picks up Support," *New York Times*, May 16, 1963 (2nd quote from a statement by the Chamber of Commerce's Senior Citizens Committee).

Quoted in Charles Whalen and Barbara Whalen, *The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act* (Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press, 1985), 185. Dirksen borrowed the phrase from Victor Hugo.

Gary S. Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 3.

Capitalists benefit from racism in myriad ways: "(1) racist prejudice divides workers, making unions weaker and resulting in lower wages for all workers; (2) the same division makes capitalist politicians safer from attacks by labor; (3) racist discrimination makes it easy to keep blacks [or other workers of color] as an unemployed reservoir of cheap labor for boom times; (4) racism provides white politicians with a scapegoat for many social problems; and (5) racism helps inspire soldiers when they are supposed to kill people in third world countries." E. K. Hunt and Howard J. Sherman, *Economics: An Introduction to Traditional and Progressive Views*, 6th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 382–83. The power of the fossil fuel industry is especially dependent on racism given the centrality of racism to the election of Republicans.

Southern Cultivator (Augusta, GA), July 1860, quoted in William L. Barney, *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 31. See also David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36–37.

Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers' Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880–1890* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), esp. 95–101.

Quoted in Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* rev. ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 141. On disenfranchisement see Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 42–44, and for the broader context, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1992). On post–World War I employers and the Klan see James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 119.

Michael Reich, *Racial Inequality: A Political-Economic Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). See also Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market," *American Sociological Review* 37, no. 5 (1972): 547–59; Patrick L. Mason, "Race, Competition and Differential Wages," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 19, no. 4 (1995): 545–67.

R.J. Redding quoted in Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 39. Wright notes that, surprisingly, a significant racial wage gap among unskilled laborers in the South developed only after World War I.

Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22.

Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 16–17, 52–54, 56 (quote).

Quoted in Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 93. On judicial appointees see Victor S. Navasky, *Kennedy Justice* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 243–76. *Profiles in Courage* was the title of JFK's 1956 book on the lives of US senators, ghostwritten by Ted Sorensen.

May 1964 Gallup poll quoted in R.J. Reinhart, "Protests Seen as Harming Civil Rights Movement in the '60s," Gallup.com, January 21, 2019; 1963 Gallup poll in Whalen and Whalen, *Longest Debate*, 24. In a 1956 poll, 63 percent of the public thought "most Negroes in the United States are being treated fairly"; Hazel Gaudet Erskine, "The Polls: Race Relations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1962): 139. In one indication of tolerance for racial terrorism, in 1937 only 57 percent thought former membership in the Ku Klux Klan should disqualify a judge from serving on the Supreme Court. George Gallup and Claude Robinson, "American Institute of Public Opinion—Surveys, 1935–38," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1938): 379.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "Big Business Supports Segregation in Birmingham," undated flyer available at https://crmvet.org.

Quoted in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 226.

There was also a deeper tradition of Black confrontation of segregation, including lawsuits, civil disobedience, and boycotts, that dated to the early post–Civil War era. See Willi Coleman, "Black Women and Segregated Public Transportation: Ninety Years of Resistance," in *Black Women in American History: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 1:295–302; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900–1906," *Journal of American History* 55, no. 4 (1969): 756–75.

Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53–70 (Glass quoted, 59). See also Morris, *Origins*, 51–63; Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Puffin, 1999); Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon, 2013).

This and the next three paragraphs draw from "Negro Business Pressure Grows," *Business Week*, April 23, 1960, 31–33.

The remainder of this section builds upon Kevin A. Young, Tarun Banerjee, and Michael Schwartz, *Levers of Power: How The 1% Rules and What the 99% Can Do about It* (London: Verso, 2020), 148–57.

Morris, *Origins*, 50, 68–73; Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation," 624.

Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 47; Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation," 623 (Shuttlesworth quoted), 624.

Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 226. On Albany see also Morris, *Origins*, 239–50.

Walker quoted in Morris, *Origins*, 258; Woods quoted in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep* South (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 152. See also Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation," 624–26; King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 47–53.

Morris, *Origins*, 250–51.

"Boycott Road to Rights"; Sitton, "Birmingham Pact."

Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 81. Quote from an unsigned 1963 memo, probably by Birmingham lawyer and future mayor David Vann, in J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 302.

Morris, *Origins*, 270; Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation," 631.

Morris, *Origins*, 247–48, 264.

Harding quoted in Morris, *Origins*, 271. See also Joseph E. Luders, *The Civil Rights Movement and the Logic of Social Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Smyer quoted in Raines, *My Soul*, 165, and in Don McKee, "Peace Leader at Birmingham Explains," *Washington Post*, May 18, 1963. For his cousin's account see Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) (quote, 126). On the committee see also Sitton, "Birmingham Pact"; Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation," 631.

Morris, *Origins*, 270–74. Quote from the committee's May 7 statement in Sitton, "Birmingham Pact," 22. See also Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 87–90; Payne, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement," 118.

Quoted in McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 424.

Morris, "Birmingham Confrontation," 623; Young quoted in Morris, *Origins*, 273.

DOJ quoted in Kenneth T. Andrews and Sarah Gaby, "Local Protest and Federal Policy: The Impact of the Civil Rights Movement on the 1964 Civil Rights Act," *Sociological Forum* 30, no. S1 (2015): 524; 2nd quote from Alan F. Westin and Barry Mahoney, *The Trial of Martin Luther King* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1974), 151.

Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Strugg le* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 328. For other examples see Young, Banerjee, and Schwartz, *Levers*, 154–56; Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 82–84; Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, eds., *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

RFK quotes from, respectively, Victor S. Navasky, *Kennedy Justice* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 205; Whalen and Whalen, *Longest Debate*, 19. Anonymous DOJ official quoted in White, *Making of the President*, 172. Whalen and Whalen date JFK's decision to May 31, though his speech did not come until June 11 (p. 16).

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 968–70; Whalen and Whalen, *Longest Debate*, 15–19. Another factor in the federal government's shift against segregation in the 1950s–1960s was global: the desire to secure the allegiance of Third World peoples against socialism. US racism was receiving increased scrutiny and undermined the global allegiance to capitalism and empire. This global context influenced many actions by the federal government, from the decision in *Brown v. Board* to the legislation of 1964–65. Combatting images of the United States as a racist country also became a key priority for US overseas propaganda during these years. See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 159–77.

Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 93–95 (1st quote is from the *Kiplinger Washington Letter*, on 94); "Why the South Took Rights Law Quietly," *Business Week*, July 11, 1964, 28.

For example, in 1960 white supremacists in Marietta, Georgia, tried to get merchants to display segregationist stickers in their windows and urged the white public to shop only at those stores. The local "chamber of commerce, however, quickly acted to squash the move." "Negro Business Pressure Grows," 32.

"Senate to Shelve Rights Bill for Weeks," *Business Week*, February 15, 1964, 28; "On Its Way into Law," *Business Week*, June 13, 1964, 25.

Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 968. On the positive effects of the movement's "radical flank," see Herbert H. Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954–1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

"Senate Buckles Down as Protests Build Up," *Business Week*, May 9, 1964, 26.

Young, Banerjee, and Schwartz, *Levers*, 157–69.

Also crucial, though beyond the scope of this chapter, is the impact of antiracist struggle on mobilization in other realms. Black militancy helped inspire all the other major movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It even gave a temporary jolt to a moribund labor movement. See Larry Isaac and Lars Christiansen, "How the Civil Rights Movement Revitalized Labor Militancy," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 5 (2002): 722–46; Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow, eds., *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below during the Long 1970s* (London: Verso, 2010).

Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (London: Verso, 2011), 184.

Rustin, “From Protest to Politics,” *Commentary*, February 1965, 29; Rustin’s bio in that piece identifies him as “the leading tactician of the civil rights movement.” On Rustin’s rightward shift see Kim Moody, *Breaking the Impasse: Electoral Politics, Mass Action, and the New Socialist Movement in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2022), 96–104.

Martin Luther King Jr., “Alabama Boycott: Here’s Plan in King’s Own Words,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, April 17, 1965, 11 (quotes); Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 414–30.

This tactical discord paralleled the conflicts over goals. Middle-class leaders distanced themselves from the growing Black protests against police violence, economic exploitation, and empire. In Birmingham after 1963, protests against police “received very little support from the black elite.” Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 93. On the broader history see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 75–106.

Aldon Morris and Dan Clawson, “Lessons of the Civil Rights Movement for Building a Worker Rights Movement,” *WorkingUSA* 8 (2005): 686.

Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 37. Even then, the proposals for boycotts and other such measures were often initiated by grassroots organizers rather than the national officials of the NAACP or SCLC.

Rustin, “From Protest,” 29; King quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 418.

A stark non-US example is the transformation of the African National Congress, which fought apartheid using economic pressure and armed resistance and then became a conservative administrator of South African capitalism after 1994.

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed., *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

State-level boycotts over anti-LGBTQ laws have likewise helped limit the impacts of Republican extremism, because they have inspired business fears that consumers and workers will desert the states that pass them. For more detail and sources see Kevin A. Young, “Georgia’s Voter Suppression Is Sparking Boycotts. History Shows They Can Work,” *Truthout*, April 9, 2021.

Bardacke, *Trampling*. For related reflections see Stephen Lerner, “Can Boycotts Help Workers Win?” *Jacobin*, August 25, 2023.

This principle has deep roots, but here I paraphrase f rom the Participatory Economics model developed by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel. See https://participatoryeconomics.info/values.

King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 48.

In late 1963, King remarked that “those whites without a vested interest in segregation have found acceptable exactly the changes that the nonviolent demonstrations present as their central demands.… The summer of our discontent, far from alienating America’s white citizens, brought them closer into harmony with its Negro citizens than ever before.” *Why We Can’t Wait*, 132–33. Despite the fears of northern Democrats about the electoral impact of siding with movement demands, Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats won landslide victories in the 1964 elections.

Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Mohammad Ali Kadivar and Neil Ketchley, “Sticks, Stones, and Molotov Cocktails: Unarmed Collective Violence and Democratization,” *Socius* 4 (2018): 1–16; Benjamin S. Case, “Molotov Cocktails to Mass Marches: Strategic Nonviolence, Symbolic Violence, and the Mobilizing Effect of Riots,” *Theory in Action* 14, no. 1 (2021): 18–38; Benjamin S. Case, *Street Rebellion: Resistance*

beyond Violence and Nonviolence (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2022). For additional sources see Kevin Young, "The Cops Can Be Defeated—But Not by Taking Obama's Advice," *Jacobin*, June 17, 2020.
See particularly Andreas Malm's case for sabotage, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (London: Verso, 2021). Malm's argument is thoughtful and nuanced, though he does not adequately address these issues.

CHAPTER SIX

"Continued Operation Has Become Intolerable"

Confronting Air Polluters

LOS ANGELES'S LEGENDARY SMOG PROBLEM GAINED WIDESPREAD ATTENTION ON July 26, 1943, when an unknown haze briefly suffocated the city. Though the precise causes of smog were still a scientific mystery, one presumed culprit was a synthetic rubber factory near downtown. After the haze dissipated the plant's emissions were the focus of numerous public complaints. In October Los Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron explained the problem to the city council:

> The manager of a large company in the near vicinity of the plant has advised me that employees of various factories and other businesses in the locality are quitting because they object to working under such disagreeable and unhealthful conditions and he expects that it will be very difficult for them to keep sufficient personnel to remain in business.… I have further been advised that paint and lacquer on automobiles left standing on the street have been so affected that many cars have had to be repainted, thus showing the destructive action of the gases and fumes and giving some idea of their serious effect on humans.
>
> I feel that the continued operation of this plant has become intolerable.[1]

The rubber plant was shuttered temporarily that fall and after the war was closed permanently.

Closing the plant spared people its noxious fumes but did little to resolve the larger smog problem in the city. As scientists would soon discover, smog was primarily caused by the mixture of automobile exhaust and sunlight, which was exacerbated by the basin-like topography of Los Angeles. Yet the episode reveals a recurring pattern in the origins of urban antipollution policies. It was not the "serious effect on humans" that had led

Los Angeles officials to take action against a polluter, but rather the effect on the most important humans: the capitalists who were struggling to retain workers and customers, to protect their property from costly damage, and to attract capital so their businesses could grow. Many LA capitalists were being harmed by the rubber plant's emissions and by the bigger smog problem. Not surprisingly, it was executives in industries like real estate, finance, retail, and tourism who perceived the clearest threat to their interests and who came to favor government antipollution policies. Their profitability depended on the property values, workforce, and customer base in the region, and they could not easily relocate their investments without losing a lot of money. They thus constituted an informal "local growth coalition" that sought to prevent the heavy polluters from completely destroying the local environment.[2] Once the effects had "become intolerable," those capitalists united against the fossil fuel, auto, and railroad industries and forced them to adopt antipollution measures.

Early antipollution efforts in other cities followed a similar pattern. In Chicago, the founders of the Society for the Prevention of Smoke in 1892 had been a who's-who list of local business elites. Most were from sectors dependent on the continued growth of the local economy and thus had a material interest in controlling smoke pollution. Several leaders came from the real estate and finance industries. Some did come from heavy-polluting industries but they usually had ties to other industries too. One, for instance, was president of a local iron works but "was also a banker and partner in a grain elevator firm."[3]

In St. Louis, which introduced some of the country's most significant antismoke regulations in the pre–World War II era, the key politician was real estate executive Bernard Dickmann, who was elected mayor in 1933. Dickmann appointed a local engineer, Raymond Tucker, who pioneered smoke abatement efforts in St. Louis and later consulted for Los Angeles and other cities. The Smoke Elimination Committee that Dickmann appointed in 1939 included representatives of the real estate, hotel, and banking industries. The city's business elite broadly supported the cause. When Illinois coal producers threatened to boycott St. Louis over a 1937 antismoke ordinance, the head of the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce, investment banker Thomas Dysart, told them "that St. Louis business would risk a boycott to end smoke."[4]

Pittsburgh's 1941 antismoke ordinance, modeled on the St. Louis version, was spearheaded by similar forces and implemented in defiance of "the same sort of threats and warnings about relocations and competitive disadvantages St. Louis had heard earlier."[5] The Chamber of Commerce and Civic Club "feared that the lack of clean air would cause population and industrial loss," notes one historian. Securing workers was of particular concern. Local elites sought to restore "a way of life that will hold and draw the best of labor, the best of technical skills," in the words of a business leader. Financial and industrial magnate Richard Mellon of Mellon National Bank and Trust Co. played a key role. In 1945 Mellon described smoke control as "the most important project in Allegheny County."[6] As *Business Week* later described this history, the ordinance was primarily enforced by "the industrial establishment" itself. In the absence of assertive city regulators, "businesses enforced the rules against each other." Mellon reportedly threatened the recalcitrant Pennsylvania Railroad "that if it did not stop lobbying in the state legislature against smoke control in Pittsburgh, he would order all his companies (Jones and Laughlin Steel, Gulf Oil, Alcoa, Koppers) to stop shipping on the line."[7]

These local initiatives by business elites paved the way for major government antipollution policies at the municipal, county, state, and ultimately federal levels. Once the elites in a "local growth coalition" had imposed antipollution measures at the local or county level in at least one major investment market, it became far easier to do so at the state level. In turn, antipollution laws in one or more major states made federal policy reform much more possible. One reason is that once the local growth coalition had triumphed over heavy polluters at the lower levels, the polluters were forced to invest resources to comply with the new regulations. Once they did so they often acquired an interest in federal action to enact uniform standards for the whole country, both to avoid a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis rivals and to save themselves from having to manufacture multiple models of the same product. California's antipollution regulations are a clear illustration of how local reforms can lead to larger-scale reforms. The local origins of the landmark 1970 Clean Air Act are the focus of the first section below, with Los Angeles occupying center stage.

My description so far might suggest that, even in the absence of any organized grassroots activism, certain business elites will naturally organize to impose antipollution policies, which will eventually make their way upward to the federal level. Given that some business sectors have favored antipollution policies, it becomes difficult to determine how much impact, if any, the environmental movement has had on policy. One leading scholar of US environmental policy, George Gonzalez, questions whether environmentalists' organizing has made any "tangible contribution" to the "level of regulation" imposed on polluters. He suggests that the mainstream national environmental groups may have wasted enormous energy and money on trying to win reforms that business would have imposed anyway.[8] The implications for today's climate movement are bleak insofar as there is little historical precedent for environmental movements exerting major impacts on their own. And non-fossil-fuel capitalists are not yet taking aggressive action against greenhouse gas emissions on their own initiative.

Gonzalez's historical argument needs to be qualified, though. He is right that business has usually been the dominant force in US environmental policy. He is also right to criticize the milquetoast, Washington-insider lobbying strategies of groups like the Environmental Defense Fund. However, anti-pollution policies *have* sometimes been influenced by nonelites, including by organized grassroots movements and by uncoordinated mass resistance (such as LA workers "quitting because they object to working under such disagreeable and unhealthful conditions"). In Pittsburgh, as I detail below, a local movement was crucial to the implementation of antipollution measures in the years before and after the passage of the 1970 Clean Air Act. In places like Pittsburgh business elites —both the "local growth coalitions" and the heavy polluters—often lamented that activist groups were winning policy reforms that went beyond what business was ready to accept. Activism has made a real difference, at least in places where people were organized and unafraid to be confrontational.

One of the best examples of a confrontational movement forcing polluters to change is a struggle not usually associated with environmentalism. In 1969 West Virginia coal miners went on strike in protest of pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease, which is caused by inhalation of mine dust. Their strike forced the state legislature to pass a health and safety bill. That state law set the stage for the federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act later that year and for the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970—another case of disruption at the lower levels leading to reform at the higher levels. The miners' struggle was largely about air pollution, just not in the conventional sense. Their movement is relevant to today's climate movement for two reasons. It shows the potential (and necessity) for an environmentalism that simultaneously confronts capitalists' destruction of worker health and their destruction of the planet. It also shows what the weapon of the strike can do if the climate movement becomes strong enough to deploy it.

The rest of this chapter explores the roots of the 1970 Clean Air Act, the role of environmental organizing during that period, and the black lung strike of 1969. A concluding section examines parallel processes in the fight against greenhouse gas emissions and suggests some overarching lessons for the climate movement.

The Local Origins of Federal Clean Air Laws

Los Angeles business elites' concern about smog led them to seek government antipollution reforms well before a broad-based movement emerged. What organized protest did exist in the mid-1940s was sporadic and mostly limited to affluent property owners who had "anxieties about real estate values," notes a historian of early smog control efforts. Pasadena luxury hotel owner Stephen Royce typified the early protesters. In early 1946 several of his faithful customers told him they would vacation in Florida in the future due to the smog in the LA area. Upon hearing those complaints he "immediately became a smog-conscious activist."[9] Fears of declining tourism-related revenues similarly activated many local capitalists.[10] Other elite activists came from industries like retail, finance, and agriculture. Agricultural producers "claimed widespread damage, especially to leafy crops, as a result of smog." Retail executive Carl Hoffman was another key figure. Hoffman once led a group of rowdy protesters who "got out of hand" at a county supervisors' meeting, "berating" the supervisors for allowing several toxic dumps to remain in operation, according to the local press.[11]

Royce and Hoffman were big fish. Hoffman became president of the Southside Chamber of Commerce the month after his protest. Both men served on the fourteen-member "Smog Advisory Committee" that the *Los Angeles Times* convened in December 1946.[12] The *Times* itself played a crucial role in publicizing the smog crisis and pressuring local and state government for ameliorative action. Its owners, the Chandler family, held a vast economic empire that stretched across the real estate, tourism, hospitality, banking, insurance, and construction industries as well as media. They had investments in other high-polluting industries too, including oil and automobiles, but the breadth of their industrial interests gave them a stake in the preservation of local air quality.[13] Norman Chandler's early crusade against smog drew upon his deep connections among the LA elite, which he used to recruit support from leaders like Royce and Hoffman. The *Times* not only featured numerous articles and editorials about smog, it also funded independent research. At a time when polluters were denying culpability and funding pseudoscientific research to absolve themselves, the Chandlers and other members of the local growth coalition had an economic interest in obtaining an accurate understanding of smog's causes.[14] In 1946 the *Times* flew St. Louis expert Raymond Tucker to LA to conduct a study of the problem. Before and after Tucker's visit, the paper stressed that smog likely had many sources and that all must be addressed.[15]

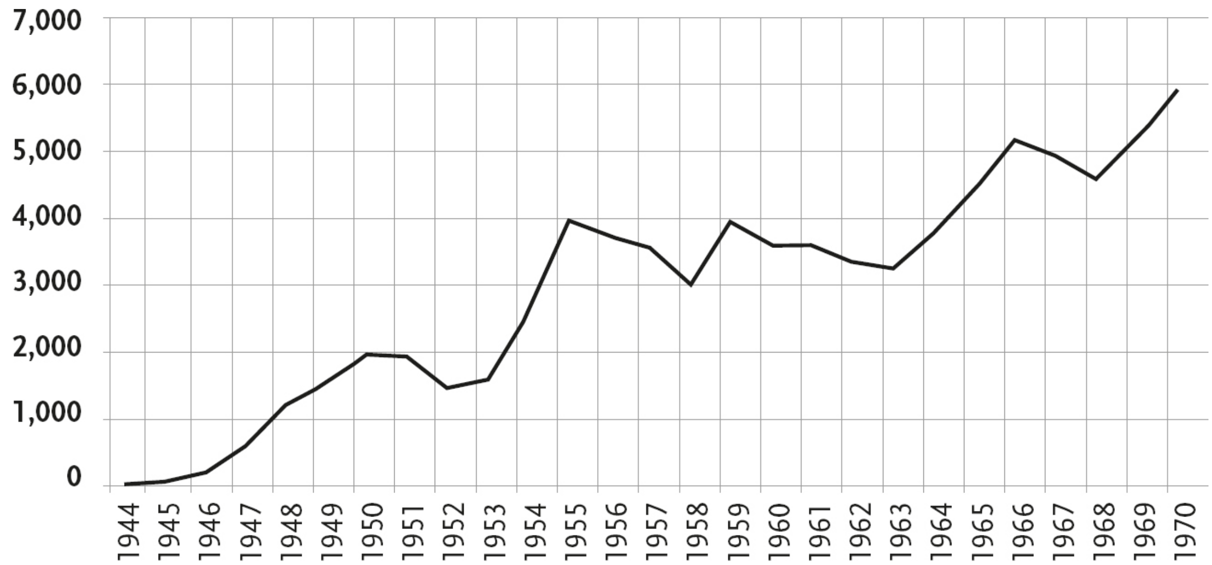
Before 1946 antismog efforts in LA city and county fell victim to "resistance from local business interests" and "apathy" among most public officials. The position of the LA Chamber of Commerce and other local chambers had been driven by polluters, especially from the oil, railroad, and timber industries. The LA chamber threatened county supervisors that businesses would lay off workers in response to antismog reforms.[16] In

1945 it successfully killed a state legislative amendment that would have facilitated the prosecution of those who violated local smog laws.

But by 1946 several considerations had increased the resolve of the *Times* and the capitalist factions it represented. For one, smog had gotten tangibly worse over the last several years. This change catalyzed a "metamorphosis from ostrich to tiger" among many LA elites who had previously tried to ignore the threat to their economic interests.[17] Moreover, the ameliorative measures tried up to that point had failed. Efforts that singled out isolated sources, such as shuttering the rubber factory, had not fixed the problem. The purely voluntary approach of encouraging polluters to reduce their emissions, and localities to enact antismog laws, had also proven ineffective. By spring 1947 less than half the localities in Los Angeles County had enacted "uniform smog ordinances," frustrating the efforts of those that had. Capitalists in favor of antipollution measures cited that failure to justify the need for a countywide Air Pollution Control District, which needed the approval of the state legislature in Sacramento.[18] The smog crisis had "become intolerable." The only solution was to force recalcitrant polluters and localities to comply.

The elite antipollution coalition waged an aggressive campaign to win the needed legislation, which required coercing the industrial holdouts. A barrage of *Times* articles and editorials criticized the LA Chamber of Commerce for opposing prosecution powers, insisting that the only solution was to "get really tough with smoke and fumes violators." In April 1947 the chamber finally endorsed the prosecution provision and the overall bill. The state chamber agreed to endorse the bill that same month after lobbying by financial mogul and past chamber president Preston Hotchkis.[19] Other local chambers directly lobbied state assembly members, getting at least one to change his vote. In May the assembly passed the bill 73–1.[20] Antipollution elites also confronted the particular industries that either opposed the law or sought to add loopholes that would render smog control "impossible." A former railroad executive who headed the *Times*'s Smog Advisory Committee successfully pushed the railroad companies to drop their opposition. When the oil and timber companies continued to resist, the *Times* published a spate of condemnations declaring that "the selfish interests of a few major industrial concerns" should not be permitted to thwart smog control efforts. The holdouts backed down, the state senate passed the bill, and the governor signed it.[21]

Figure 16: *Los Angeles Times* references to smog



Source: ProQuest Historical Newspapers database.

The 1947 California reform was just the opening act in a long struggle against smog, but the story captures the essential conflict between locally oriented capitalists and heavy polluters that would remain central to future battles. As the insufficiency of the 1947 law became evident, the former group began to confront the latter more assertively. In 1953 California executives formed the Air Pollution Foundation, whose "board of trustees was composed almost entirely of representatives from business."[22] The foundation played a crucial role in validating earlier scientific research on smog, namely the studies of biochemist Arie Haagen-Smit that had pointed to auto emissions as the principal culprit. It funded additional research that confirmed Haagen-Smit's theory. "Consensus on this point grew quickly" thereafter, drowning out the auto industry's propaganda that there was not "any connection at all" between its emissions and smog.[23] The capitalist validation of independent science helped drive an expansion in the government's capacity and willingness to enforce existing regulations. It also led to additional state-level reforms. In 1958 the LA Air Pollution

Control District requested new state-level measures, leading to a 1960 law that forced the auto industry to install devices that limited the escape of unburned hydro-carbons from automobile crankcases. Between then and 1968 the California legislature passed several additional measures to restrict tailpipe emissions of nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, and other toxins, each measure compelled by the recognition that previous action had been too narrow and too dependent on voluntary measures by polluters. The continued rapid expansion of auto ownership increased the urgency of the quest for solutions.[24]

The success of these reforms created a dilemma for the automakers. California represented around one-tenth of all US auto sales, so the industry had to install emission control technology if it wanted to keep that market. The auto industry was also based out of state, meaning it lacked the ability to threaten mass layoffs in retaliation. Once the technology was ready the industry decided it would be easier to install it on all new models rather than produce one model for California and one for other states. Auto companies opted to install the crankcase devices mandated by California's 1960 law on all new cars sold in the country.[25] When the legislatures in Pennsylvania and New York appeared ready to adopt auto emission standards equal to or stronger than California's, the auto companies decided that federal-level standards were the lesser evil. As two observers comment, the industry had advocated states' rights to set their own standards as "a tactic to forestall federal intervention," since they had not "contemplated that the states would exercise initiative." But when a patchwork of different state-level standards "appeared to be imminent," automakers suddenly decided that "uniform federal standards" were "the easiest road." This shift made possible the first significant federal law on auto emissions, passed by Congress in 1965 with the support of the industry. The resulting regulations essentially extended California's standards to the whole country.[26] Another study notes that "the political power of environmentalists at the national level" was negligible in 1965. The legislation passed because auto giants "were threatened with a state of affairs even worse from their perspective than federal air pollution legislation—namely, inconsistent and progressively more stringent environmental laws at the state and local level."[27]

Although the auto industry's logic in supporting federal standards was to preempt states from passing stricter versions, it did not wholly succeed. The California congressional delegation vehemently defended the state's right to set stronger standards. In waging that battle the state's politicians in Washington were again representing the interests of locally oriented capitalists back home who had recognized the need for still stricter measures in light of the holes in prior legislation and the ever-increasing auto usage in California.[28] In 1967 that interest again prevailed over the auto companies, with California securing a unique waiver as part of the national Air Quality Act. The state would use that waiver repeatedly to enact new antipollution laws that went beyond federal standards. Many of those state standards would later be adopted at the national level.[29]

In the late 1960s some other big polluters also changed their positions on federal regulation. Producers of bituminous (soft) coal came to favor federal emission standards for power plants after several states and cities had taken steps toward regulation. In 1966 New York City banned the burning of soft coal without new emission control technology and lowered the level of sulfur permitted in fuel. Later that same year, the governors of New York and three other states announced a joint effort to cut industrial air pollution, including sulfur content.[30] By advancing demand-side measures at the local and state levels outside coal country, proponents of antipollution measures had found the industry's weak spot. Big coal's failure to block those measures showed "that it was virtually impotent in local political arenas" where it did not control significant employment or tax revenues, parallel to the auto industry's relative impotence in California. Big Coal thus decided to support the 1967 Air Quality Act for the same reason that Big Auto had supported the 1965 act: uniform federal standards were a preferable alternative to "runaway state and local lawmaking."[31]

Steel followed a similar logic. During Senate hearings on what became the 1970 Clean Air Act,[32] Fred Tucker, an official at the National Steel Corporation, testified that his industry had come to favor federal air quality standards. Tucker urged that a new bill should "give HEW [the federal

Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] authority to set air quality standards for all contaminants." Senator Thomas Eagleton remarked that it was "curious" that the industry usually opposed federal intervention but "in this instance, at least as far as National Air Quality Standards are concerned, industry—a significant portion of the steel industry in particular—wants the intervention of the Federal Government." Tucker answered that "we have invested, as an industry, roughly a half billion dollars in air quality control equipment," much of it "in very recent years," but that the power of states and locales to set their own standards jeopardized those investments. If the industry invested resources to comply with a state standard and then a county or city passed a tougher standard, the industry might be required to make additional investments, ultimately paying more for compliance than it would if HEW were to set the standards unilaterally. The result could be "utter chaos," Tucker said.[33]

US business as a whole expressed increased concern about pollution by the end of the decade. This sentiment was reflected in coverage by the leading newspapers, whose owners, like the Chandlers of the *Los Angeles Times*, tended to be connected to a wide range of capitalist sectors. Between October 1970 and September 1971 five top US papers published nearly 1,400 editorials on the environment.[34] Surveys around that time indicated "that some 80% of stockholders and businessmen support tough penalties against industrial polluters." One reason was surely the interest of local growth coalitions in restricting pollution.[35] The other reason was that some big polluters had begun to invest in compliance in response to local and state reforms, and they thus came to favor uniform regulations at the federal level. In 1971 business consultant Charles Allen wrote that the business elite in general, though "once opposed to this development of stronger federal authority," had recently "tended to recognize it as inevitable and possibly even desirable in the long run." If there was to be any regulation, they favored "a governmental system of general regulations that apply to all competitors."[36]

This is not the language of morality. The elites who spearheaded California's early antipollution measures were hardly progressive. The Chandlers, and *Times* news coverage, had a deep "hatred of the labor and radical movements," as the family's biographers note. Norman Chandler once said that "The *Times* basic philosophies" were "supporting the Republican Party and free enterprise."[37] Albert Stewart, the state assembly member from Pasadena who led the 1947 effort to punish smog violators, had earlier led the efforts of the Pasadena Improvement Association to restrict Black property ownership in the area.[38] When it came to smog, the shift in their position was by no means motivated by a moral concern for smog's "effect on humans," in the words of LA's mayor.

Nonetheless, locally oriented capitalists could be pushed to confront big polluters, and big polluters could in turn develop a material interest in antipollution measures. This case highlights an important lesson for today's movements: even the worst people can be coerced into changing their behavior. If the situation "becomes intolerable" for them, regardless of who or what is making it intolerable, they will seek change.[39]

Emotional, Overzealous, Hysterical

Still, capitalist initiative does not fully explain the federal environmental reforms of the Nixon era (1969–74). The 1970 Clean Air Act and other contemporaneous reforms—including the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the signing of the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Water Act, and a raft of smaller changes—turned out to be more robust than most pro-reform capitalists and their political representatives had intended. For example, the National Environmental Policy Act mandated environmental impact studies prior to the approval of major industrial projects, a requirement that became valuable for future environmentalist litigation. The Clean Air Act ordered a 90 percent reduction in tailpipe emissions of smog-forming chemicals by 1975–76 and provided for national air quality standards based purely on science and health, not on the "feasibility" for polluters. The act's "multitude of direct commands" to industry was a remarkable "new departure" in US environmental policy, as one former EPA official notes.[40] Such measures were enabled, to a very significant degree, by the emerging grassroots movement and the public sentiment that it represented. Once legislation was passed, the movement also played a key role in determining whether it was enforced.

By the end of the 1960s there was finally a widespread, organized movement composed of working- and middle-class people that directly confronted polluters. It took a range of forms, from Black organizers in St. Louis who mobilized against lead poisoning to white Appalachians protesting surface coal mining. Some labor unions were also involved. The Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) sought to build a labor-environmentalist coalition that connected workplace dangers to environmental destruction outside the workplace. The United Farm Workers similarly fought against pesticides that were killing workers and contaminating the food, water, soil, and air.[41] In smog-ridden cities like Los Angeles, air pollution was becoming a focus of organized popular activism. In 1967 hundreds of thousands of Californians told Congress to preserve the state's federal waiver. Economic pressure campaigns in Los Angeles took aim at the oil and auto industries. Organizers also targeted the regulators at the Air Pollution Control District for their lax approach to stationary source polluters.[42]

The movement was highly decentralized, based almost entirely at the local and state levels. This was an asset for several reasons. First, polluters were often more susceptible to pressure from the public and other capitalists —and less able to control politicians and regulators—at those lower levels. Second, it was easier to organize people to confront industry in their own communities and workplaces than to mobilize them for occasional trips to Washington. Finally, the lack of well-known environmental organizations at the national level may ironically have been an advantage, for there was no co-optable lobby to provide cover for tepid reform measures, and which might "have settled for far less" than the final form of the Clean Air Act. The politicians who designed and approved the 1970 act, including Democratic Senator Edmund Muskie and President Richard Nixon, had no clear group "with whom to bargain." They therefore wound up going further than they wanted in order to appease the growing movement and the concerned public it represented.[43]

When steel man Fred Tucker warned about the "utter chaos" threatening his industry in 1970, he understood the environmental movement as central to that chaos. State-by-state variation in pollution standards and enforcement was a headache in itself, but "perhaps most damaging" in the steel industry's view was the fact that "highly emotional, over-zealous" groups were organizing big turnouts at local hearings about air quality (language infused with sexism given the prominent role of women in those local movements). This pressure on regulators and politicians was producing a "numbers game with air quality standards" wherein officials in each place were pushed to adopt standards more stringent than those of other states and locales. In one case, HEW had recommended an "air quality criterion of 80 micrograms per cubic meter" for particulate matter, but "then the numbers game began with one State reducing the number to 75, then 70, and finally 65 in Cleveland, Ohio, … following a near-riot at its air quality standards hearing."[44]

One locale that caused special consternation for steel executives was Pittsburgh, where much of the industry was headquartered. In 1969 county commissioners passed an ordinance that limited sulfur dioxide emissions by the steel and electric industries and stipulated that recalcitrant companies were "liable to a court injunction which would close a plant, imprison company officials, or bring a fine." The new regulations were a product of what the business press characterized as "five months of emotional lobbying by citizens groups and conservationists fighting for stricter controls."[45] Public hearings in Pittsburgh in September 1969 were attended by hundreds of Pittsburgh residents, mostly middle-class professionals, students, and homemakers but many labor unionists as well, including OCAW members and steelworkers who spoke in favor of stricter antipollution regulations. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in October 1969 that the United Steelworkers union was "one of the most vocal groups in the breathers' lobby," as the movement became informally known. OCAW and steelworkers understood the connection between the pollution inside and outside the plants: the same pollutants that were suffocating residents were also filling workers' lungs when they went to work.[46]

The result of agitation by this antipollution coalition was a set of standards significantly tougher than what "many of Pittsburgh's industrial giants" had proposed to the commissioners, and tougher than what Richard Mellon and his elite colleagues had ever championed in earlier decades. Weeks after the Pittsburgh hearings the Pennsylvania air pollution commission raised standards for the state as a whole, a decision in which "public agitation seems to have a had a striking effect," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. The commission, which was headed by an official employed by the steel industry, had initially proposed significantly more lax standards for sulfur dioxide and particulate matter emissions, but tightened them after the hearings—in the latter case, from 100 micrograms down to 65. The standards were "much too stringent" according to a Chamber of Commerce official.[47]

This juncture marked the end of "the era of exclusive, elite-driven, voluntary regulation" in Pittsburgh, notes historian James Longhurst. After the 1969 hearings local organizers formed the Group against Smog and Pollution (GASP) to fight for stricter regulations on polluters, which by the early 1970s had thousands of dues-paying members in the city.[48] GASP organized residents to attend hearings, submit public comments, hold protests, and sometimes initiate litigation. The group focused on steel companies and the local and state officials in charge of implementing the recent federal air pollution laws. Though GASP's strategy mostly involved working through institutional avenues, it did impose some important constraints on polluters. For instance, GASP won a formal expansion of the scope for public input and litigation in regulatory debates in both Pittsburgh and the state of Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh was one of many places in the late 1960s and 1970s where local environmental groups contributed to a newly "confrontational process" of environmental policymaking. Many of those groups helped strengthen antipollution laws and their enforcement.[49]

As business leaders bemoaned, these local movements contributed indirectly to the federal air pollution legislation of the 1960s and the Clean Air Act of 1970. The Clean Air Act was also shaped by the broader groundswell of environmentalist sentiment that extended far beyond the ranks of regular activists. Analysts of the 1970 act and other Nixon-era reforms usually attribute these changes to the surging importance of environmental concerns among the US public, as expressed in opinion polls and in the estimated twenty million US residents who participated in the first Earth Day in 1970.[50] Senate Democrats Edmund Muskie and Henry Jackson, both with presidential ambitions, competed to be identified with strong environmental reforms. Moreover, they faced public criticism from Ralph Nader and his team of environmental advocates when their proposals were friendly to polluters. President Nixon, in turn, reluctantly endorsed reforms in an attempt to "take the initiative away from the Democrats" and "identify the Republican Party with concern for environmental quality," as Nixon official Russell Train privately advised in 1969. The tacit back-and-forth between Muskie and Nixon, combined with outside criticism from watchdogs, ultimately led to an act "more stringent than either of them would have preferred." For example, Muskie, though widely viewed as an environmental champion, had originally wanted to limit the act's mandates for auto emissions to what was feasible with the industry's current technology. The final version instead was "technology-forcing" in that it compelled auto companies to rapidly develop new technology.[51] Nixon felt compelled to sign the bill despite his objections. As an administration official explained, "given the nearly hysterical support for the environmental movement, a veto would have been futile: Congress would have promptly overridden it."[52]

Naturally the auto companies claimed the sky was falling. GM insisted the new emission standards were "impossible" to meet, Chrysler said "This will bankrupt us," and Ford warned the entire industry "would have to shut down."[53] As usual, it was a lie. Polluters just didn't want to invest the resources if it might mean a small reduction in their profits. Despite its vociferous protests, Detroit quickly found and installed catalytic converter technology. GM and Ford got the oil industry to begin selling unleaded gasoline, which was necessary so that the converters would not clog.[54] One reason for its success was that the law tacitly pitted automakers against each other, since the fastest company to produce the needed technology could reap a competitive advantage. GM and Ford anticipated coming out on top, so by the early 1970s they were "more optimistic" and less resistant to the

Clean Air Act's new standards. The polluters' united front was fractured.[55] Later that decade, even policymakers who whined about "hysterical" environmentalists and opposed the technology-forcing approach conceded that the law had dramatically reduced tailpipe emissions.[56]

The forces that favored pollution control had successfully defied the auto industry's threats of a capital strike. The will of capitalists outside the heavy-polluting industries, plus the growing environmentalist mobilization and public sentiment, were reflected in the actions of officials in Washington. The tripartite class conflict—between different sectors of capital and between capitalists and the working population—in turn enabled the government to develop the regulatory capacity to enforce the auto emission standards. The same held for other aspects of the 1970 Clean Air Act. Although the act had many flaws and omissions, and polluters would wage a continual war against enforcement, it did result in meaningful changes in heavy-polluting industries.[57] Emotional, overzealous, and hysterical environmentalists contributed to that outcome.

"No Law, No Work": Coal Miners Force Government Action

West Virginia's coal miners were even more emotional in 1969. In February and March they waged a mass strike until their state government enacted a law extending workers' compensation to victims of pneumoconiosis. The strike and the West Virginia law added to the pressure for federal legislation, which Congress finalized in December. As Nixon was considering a veto, mine workers again began walking off the job, at which point he promptly announced he would sign it. Both strikes were wildcats, meaning that the workers struck in defiance of their national union leaders. In addition to compensating victims, the new legislation improved safety in the mines by limiting the permissible amounts of coal dust and methane and subjecting companies to closer oversight. Although the labor movement typically targets employers, the black lung strikes of 1969 show how an organized and confrontational workforce can also force government officials to take action.

The new legislation followed a November 1968 explosion at a coal mine in Farmington, West Virginia, that killed 78 workers. Some accounts attribute the 1969 laws primarily to this disaster, since it helped focus national attention on miners' working conditions. This explanation is flawed. Comparable explosions had happened before without generating real changes. The death of 119 miners in an accident in Illinois had led to the previous federal safety reform, the 1952 Coal Mine Safety Act, but the law had no discernible impact on fatalities and injuries.[58] Beyond occasional major disasters, coal miners died on an almost daily basis. In the century before 1969 about 119,000 coal miners died at work, and untold numbers more died later from lung illnesses caused by mine dust. In the 1960s hundreds were still dying in the mines each year, eliciting scant outrage from elites.[59]

Elites' immediate reactions to the Farmington disaster did not bode well for transformation. West Virginia's governor said, "This is a hazardous business, and what has occurred here is one of the hazards of being a miner." Tony Boyle, the autocratic and probusiness president of the United Mine Workers (UMW), reassured local workers that Consolidation Coal, which owned the mine, was "one of the best companies to work with as far as cooperation and safety are concerned."[60] Having shown contempt for worker safety in the past, it was entirely possible that coal companies, politicians, and business-friendly union leaders would again respond to a crisis with token actions. It was highly unlikely that the industry would agree to compensate disabled miners. For these reasons the common narrative that identifies the Farmington disaster as the principal catalyst of the 1969 mine safety legislation (worker deaths led to public outcry, which led government to regulate business) is misleading. As historian Alan Derickson and others have argued, the "disaster-outcry-regulation explanation" fails to explain the regulations enacted in 1969. It was the strikes, and the credible threat they would continue, that forced legislators to pass and then implement decent regulatory laws.[61]

The miners had a long history of militant action, including strikes and armed self-defense. This militancy was a product of several factors, including their central importance in the economy (and thus their ability to exercise power by stopping production) and the tendency of dangerous, side-by-side work to foster solidarity among workers. Many miners' strikes prior to 1969 had been over safety issues. Disabled miners and family members of the deceased had also organized in recent years to win benefits from the UMW's Welfare and Retirement Fund.[62]

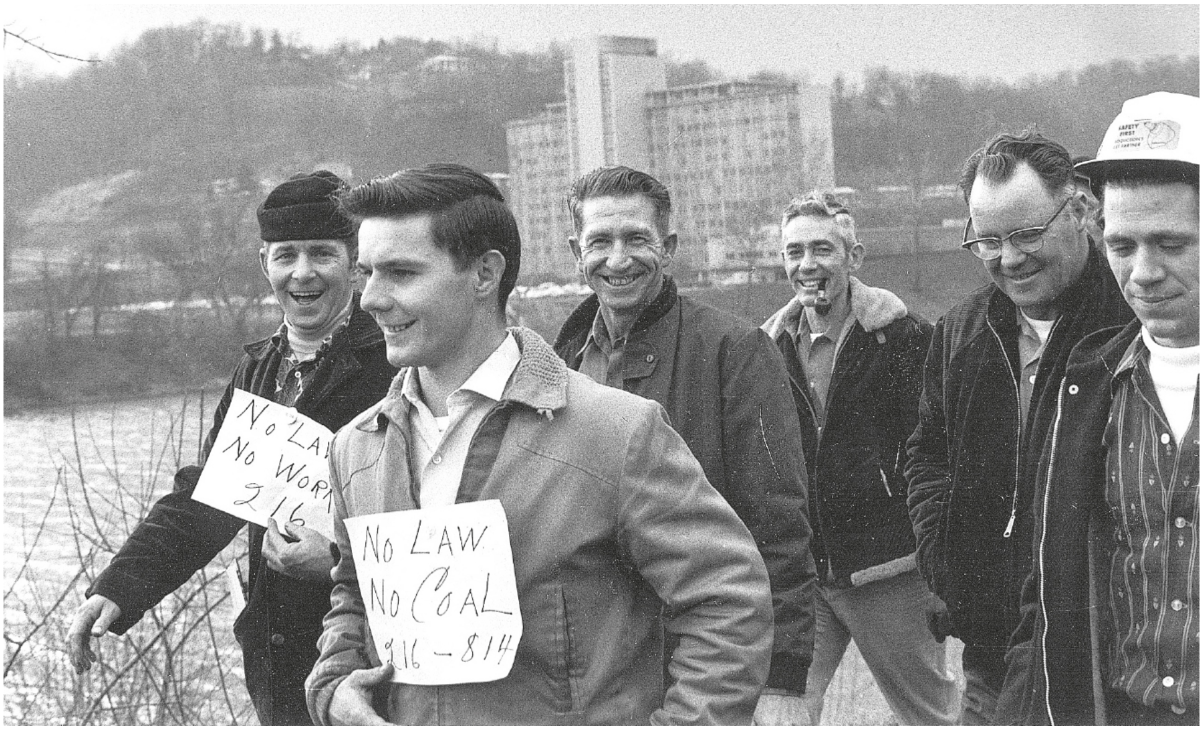


Figure 17: Coal miners march in Charleston, West Virginia, 1969. (Photo by Douglas Yarrow)

The 1969 strikes were facilitated by this culture of militancy and solidarity, though they did not happen automatically. Months of collective learning and empowerment preceded the first walkouts in mid-February. In 1968 three West Virginia physicians began raising awareness in mining communities about black lung, thus validating the long-time anger of disabled miners and families. In January 1969 some dissident UMW activists formed the West Virginia Black Lung Association to push for state legislation to compensate victims, since the industry and government refused to recognize pneumoconiosis as compensable unless it progressed to a very advanced stage where it became visible on an X-ray. The organizers pursued an institutional strategy by hiring a former state senator to lobby for them in Charleston. However, they also organized and mobilized their base, holding mass meetings and rallies across the state, with workers collectively skipping work to attend the February 11 rally in the capital. At those events the physicians provided more legitimation for the workers' demands. The rank and file also developed a shared sense of power as they marched alongside thousands of other miners. This organizing cultivated "a rank-and-file consensus on the importance of the movement's aims and on the necessity of confrontational collective action" if lobbying failed to get them justice. At the February 11 rally some carried signs stating their threat: "No law, no work."[63]

Figure 18: On the steps of the West Virginia State Capitol in Charleston, 1969. (Photo by Douglas Yarrow)

When the industry tied up the bill in the House Judiciary Committee, the workers made good on the threat. By February 23 some 12,000 were on strike, growing to 30,000 by February 26 and 45,000 by March 2. These numbers included almost all the state's coal miners plus some solidarity strikers in Ohio and Pennsylvania. The strike "shut down virtually all coal mining operations in the state," reported the *Charleston Gazette*.[64] Workers monitored the legislative process and promised to continue their strike until the state passed a good compensation bill. In crucial changes to the committee's original version, the House bill placed the burden on coal companies and the state to prove that workers' lung ailments were not caused by coal dust and downgraded the importance of X-rays in verifying worker claims. After passing through the Senate the final legislation was slightly less proworker but still won their qualified support and their return to work.[65]

The industry reaction was predictable. The state's Coal Association wailed that the strikers were "wiping out jobs." Its president decried the House bill as "galloping socialism," saying it "opened Pandora's box. What happened to the coal industry today could happen to every business and industry in the state tomorrow."[66] Just as offensive as the law's content were the means the workers had used to achieve it. Self-styled moderates professed to support the goal but condemned the violation of decorum. A *Charleston Gazette* editorial accused the workers of "lobbying with [a] club." House legislators "operated in a climate of panic, with thousands of coal miners on wildcat strike," and as a result "many voted not for what they felt was right or reasonable but for what they felt compelled to." In place of "reasoned judgment" that normally guides policymaking, the House had bowed to "pick handle pressure and whiplash emotions."[67] Interestingly, as if in direct retort, a political cartoon next to the editorial mocked the moderates' sanctimonious insistence on etiquette (figure 19). Workers, of course, could not simply buy politicians with campaign donations and "cocktail parties and dinners" the way capitalists could.[68]

The impacts of the wildcatters' actions continued to reverberate upward after West Virginia's governor signed the law. One site of change was the UMW itself. The union's central office, which had never taken coal dust seriously as a topic for contract negotiations, and which had staunchly opposed the rank-and-file efforts, suddenly sought to claim national leadership on the issue. In some other coal-producing states the UMW's national and district leaders mounted a concerted effort to replicate West Virginia's legislation, helping mine workers win several new laws within a year.[69] This pragmatic shift was the benign side of President Tony Boyle's response to growing internal dissent in the union. The other side was violence. He ordered the murder of UMW dissident Joseph “Jock” Yablonski, his wife Margaret, and daughter Charlotte, for which he was later convicted.[70] The dissident movement eventually culminated in a victory for Miners for Democracy, a union reform slate, in 1972.[71]

Figure 19: Cartoon by James Dent in the *Charleston Gazette*, March 3, 1969. (Courtesy of the West Virginia Division of Culture and History)

The strikes of February–March 1969 and the state-level actions that followed also lent added impetus to the push for federal legislation.[72] Some federal bill was likely after the Farmington explosion, but there was a real possibility it would be toothless. The two biggest points of contention were the regulation of coal dust levels and compensation for disabled miners and their families. On the dust standard, the Nixon administration and large coal companies had favored a standard of 4.5 milligrams per cubic meter. Administration officials chose that level not based on science but because the industry endorsed it as feasible: it was "what we can get now," according to Interior Secretary Walter Hickel. Yet in the final bill the standard was set at 3 milligrams, effective within six months, to be reduced to 2 milligrams within three years—then the toughest standard in the world. Alan Derickson concludes that "the combination of the preponderance of evidence and the ongoing threat of a disruptive work stoppage compelled Congress to settle on tight limitations on miners' exposure to the dust hazard."[73]

The strike threat was perhaps even more central in ensuring federal compensation. Disabled miners who had left the mines before July 1969 were not covered under the West Virginia law, a giant loophole that the Supreme Court had guaranteed through its prior rulings against retroactive compensation for workers. Disabled workers in many coal states still had no hope of compensation. Nixon opposed the compensation provision and had sat on the bill for over ten days after it passed Congress, as his aides hinted at a possible veto. At midnight on December 29 around 1,200 West Virginia miners staged a walkout, again in defiance of Boyle. As the *New York Times* reported, the strike "seemed certain to spread rapidly during the New Year week," while the coal industry warned that "a widespread work stoppage now could pose a serious threat to fuel supplies, particularly for the power industry." Nixon signed the bill within "a matter of hours."[74] It was by no means a total victory for the workers. Unlike the West Virginia law, the federal version subsidized the coal companies since the first three years of claims would be covered by taxpayers. Yet it was still a historic victory that led to benefits for some half a million people by 1980.[75] If not for the strikes the reform would have been much weaker.

As in the contemporaneous struggle against smog, the mine workers exploited latent tensions among elites. The most important was between large and small coal companies. It was easier for bigger companies to absorb the costs of regulation, including the capital investments for machinery to reduce dust concentrations. They were thus more amenable to federal regulations provided that the standards were universally applied across the industry. This position was communicated by John Corcoran, chair of the National Coal Association and president of Consolidation Coal.

Speaking to the US Senate a day after the West Virginia legislation was signed, Corcoran stated that there was an "advantage in having uniformity." He repeatedly insisted "that the law should apply to all coal mines" and should be "uniformly and vigorously enforced."[76] He no doubt anticipated that the large companies represented by the National Coal Association would gain market share as smaller companies struggled to meet the new standards. Later analyses proved him correct.[77]

Corcoran's speech to the National Coal Association convention in June gave further insight into the pragmatic logic of the big companies. Following high-profile disasters like Farmington and a miners' movement that made the coal industry look bad, the need to keep attracting "competent young men" to the mines amid a tight labor market required the industry to support some degree of safety regulation. As *Fortune* magazine warned soon after, the upsurge of worker militancy made clear that "young miners are not going to tolerate hazardous working conditions." Moreover, as sociologist Barbara Ellen Smith writes, "The strike was widely interpreted as evidence that discontent was on the rise," and "it was unclear in the early months of 1969 what new upsurge might follow the black lung movement. The wildcat strike and militant demonstrations raised the unsettling possibility that the social revolt of blacks and students was spreading to the mainstream of the working class." The need to mollify militant workers was what Corcoran meant when he referred to the "enlightened self-interest" of the industry.[78]

Corcoran also saw an advantage in being at the table. Some sort of congressional safety bill was inevitable and "the industry must realistically face up to the fact." Unlike some of his colleagues, Corcoran was calculating that the industry was better off trying to water down the bill than opposing it altogether. Being at the table would allow the industry to decry "the unrealistic provisions that are being subjected [*sic*] to the industry under the emotion of the moment." If Congress would not meet the industry halfway, the companies could use their chokehold over the nation's energy supply to lay off workers or raise prices. As Corcoran ominously threatened, the conveniences of "our daily life would cease to be if the coal industry of this country were suddenly shut down."[79] Corcoran's participation in the legislative negotiations yielded some short-term results, as he was able to influence key provisions in the Senate bill sponsored by West Virginia's Jennings Randolph.[80]

However, the continued threat of mine worker militancy partially neutralized the industry's threats of layoffs and higher prices. The legislative victory of 1969, though limited, did not put an end to worker agitation. Wildcat strikes proliferated through the mid-1970s, even in defiance of judicial injunctions on behalf of employers.[81] Sociologist Michael Wallace concludes that "one unintended consequence of safety legislation" was "to legitimate more aggressive strategies by miners to improve conditions." Those strategies had measurable impacts on the industry. Wallace's analysis of the coal sector for the years 1930–82 finds that, when controlling for other variables, strikes led to subsequent reductions in injuries and fatalities.[82] The industry today is still dangerous and unhealthy, which points to the inherent limitations of reforms within a capitalist and extraction-intensive economy.[83] But to the degree that meaningful improvements have been won, it's largely thanks to mine workers' use of "more aggressive strategies."

Implications for the Climate Movement

The stories in this chapter suggest that local disruption to capitalist interests is often a prerequisite for achieving government policy change at the state and national levels. The sources of disruption varied. Efforts to address smog pollution initially stemmed from a contradiction within the capitalist class: big emitters were jeopardizing the material conditions upon which other capitalists depended. Popular pressures played a secondary role in that struggle, though they increased in importance by the late 1960s and ultimately strengthened antismog policies beyond what capitalists sought. The disruption to the coal industry stemmed more directly from workers' initiative. How might these past victories be useful to the climate movement?

First, we must acknowledge the differences of context between then and now. Some of the conditions that facilitated reforms in 1969–70 are not present today. In 1970 Republican Party leaders perceived an electoral incentive to support environmental regulation, if half-heartedly. Today's Republicans have unabashedly embraced the genocidal consensus and suffer no electoral penalty. The Democrats, meanwhile, are highly deferential to business complaints about compliance costs and less sensitive to environmentalists' criticisms than the Democrats in 1970. Interparty electoral competition is unlikely to facilitate major new climate legislation the way it facilitated Nixon-era environmental reform.

In addition, there are inherent differences between fighting greenhouse gases and localized pollutants. The disruption from greenhouse gases is not as apparent to capitalists as the smog in LA or Pittsburgh. This may change as climate chaos escalates, but we are not yet at a point where climate disruption "has become intolerable." Big polluters could also absorb the costs of clean air regulations more easily than full decarbonization. Installing scrubbers in smokestacks or catalytic converters in cars is cheaper than retooling entire plants and industries. Moreover, it is possible for polluters to dramatically reduce their emission of local pollutants while still spewing carbon into the atmosphere. In a sense the Clean Air Act gave companies license to continue greenhouse gas emissions provided they reduced their other emissions. Though the Clean Air Act as written clearly applies to all air pollutants that "endanger" the public, including carbon, the fossil fuel industry's control over the judiciary has blocked that requirement from being enforced.[84]

These differences do not render the historical cases irrelevant for the climate war, though. There are also some parallels. Elites' efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, though meager and scattered, have been driven by a logic similar to that which led them to restrict localized pollutants. Sectors of capital that are harmed by climate disruption, and for which fossil fuels are relatively dispensable, have been the quickest to support proclimate policy. One barometer of this shift is the coverage at capitalist news outlets like the *Financial Times* and *Bloomberg*. Like the midcentury *Los Angeles Times*, these outlets represent the broad interests of the capitalist class, which for them are more important than those of Exxon or Shell. They give extensive attention to climate and typically support government proposals for tighter regulation of fossil fuels and more spending on renewables.[85]

When they have faced major disruption due to climate chaos, some have opted for change. California's example is again instructive.[86] Its early laws to cut greenhouse gas emissions—from automobiles and utilities in 2002 and across the whole state economy in 2006—were championed by state officials with two primary goals in mind: to confront the problem of electricity supply in the state, which had become evident in the crisis of 2000–2001, and to protect locally oriented capitalists, including "a $102bn tourism industry and a $37.5bn agriculture industry," from the ravages of climate chaos.[87] The sectoral composition and business practices of California-based industry then shifted in a way that made the reforms durable. In the years immediately following the 2006 law, California received almost half "of the total venture capital investment in renewable energy/cleantech" in the entire country. In 2010 an oil industry effort at repeal failed, largely because a growing business coalition now favored the 2006 law. The renewable and "cleantech" industries now commanded more economic and thus political weight. Meanwhile, utilities and even some fossil fuel companies had already invested the capital necessary to comply, so they too opposed repeal.[88]

California's climate reforms have also reverberated upward. The auto industry initially fought the reforms but then decided to support uniform federal standards, particularly after seventeen additional states followed California's lead. More recent climate reforms in California, such as the state's 2022 move to ban the sale of cars with internal combustion engines by 2035 and its 2023 law requiring corporate climate impact disclosures, may have a similar impact at the national level.[89] These examples parallel the process seen throughout this chapter, wherein reforms are won in one important jurisdiction and then spread more widely. One reason is polluters' interest in uniform standards. Another is the exchange of information among state-level regulators and politicians. When one or a few states adopt a "policy that goes further" in limiting the freedom of polluters, state-level officials often try to meet that higher standard, knowing that business resistance in their states is likely to be softer once the standard is in place elsewhere. For these reasons many climate organizers and analysts have prioritized action at the local and state levels.[90]

In another important example, major players in the fossil fuel industry ended up lobbying for regulations on methane emissions. Biden's restoration of Obama-era rules on methane leaks from new oil and gas wells was supported by Exxon, Shell, and BP. Those companies had protested Trump's rollback of the rules. The reason was that they had already "invested millions of dollars to promote natural gas as a cleaner fuel than coal in the nation's power plants." They also worried "that unrestricted leaks of methane could undermine that marketing message and hurt demand," particularly in foreign markets.[91] In 2020 the French government had blocked a trade deal for liquefied natural gas from a US company "in part over methane pollution concerns for US-produced gas," which reflected pressures from European publics and regulated companies to impose penalties on unregulated US companies.[92] It was an example of how pressure from the public and capitalist rivals could lead to a change in businesses' behavior, which then gave those businesses an incentive to support regulation. Polluters based in other jurisdictions—in this case overseas—were taking action to prevent the US free-riders from reaping a competitive advantage. If the climate movement can wage successful action against polluters in more workplaces, cities, states, and countries, there is a greater chance that those polluters will seek to punish the holdouts in other jurisdictions.

Obviously, this all needs to happen rapidly. It would be mistaken to conclude that "incrementalism can be a successful strategy for climate change policy," if that means the climate movement should seek "incremental compromises with important special interest groups" and hope for slow and steady progress toward our goal.[93] We don't have time to wait for gradual emission reductions nudged along by small government reforms.

Perhaps the most relevant lesson of the fight for clean air, from the cities to the coal mines, is that a disruptive movement can speed up the process. The climate movement can accelerate elites' defection from fossil fuels to the extent that it accentuates the costs of fossil fuels and climate destruction for those elites. As West Virginia coal miners and local environmental groups both realized in 1969, relying on the "enlightened self-interest" of capitalists was a doomed strategy. Elites did not naturally choose the enlightened option. They did so in response to "highly emotional" movements that threatened them with "near-riot" conditions as they tried to enjoy their "dinners and cocktail parties." In those conditions the status quo "became intolerable." And it often went from annoying to intolerable quite rapidly.

The most powerful form of popular action in this chapter is the coal miners' strike. A large-scale strike in strategic locations of the economy would be the best way to compel government to take action against the fossil fuel industry. An indication of the continued power of strikes came in 2019 when Sara Nelson, the progressive president of the flight attendants' union, hinted at a general strike in response to the government shutdown by Trump and Republicans.[94] Like Nixon a half-century earlier, Trump reversed course within "a matter of hours."

There are many reasons why it's hard to imagine US workers striking over climate destruction: it's not nearly as visceral as black lung was to the miners; a climate strike would likely be illegal and few workers are ready to strike illegally; and the US labor movement has little tradition of striking over government policies (the black lung rebellion being a major exception). However, there may soon come a point where strikes become a tactical possibility, particularly as climate chaos deepens and capitalists seek to make workers pay the economic costs through austerity and inflation. Reaching that point will require much more education than is currently happening in unions. Workers must come to understand the connections between their material well-being and the abolition of fossil fuels, and they must come to see strikes as both a legitimate and necessary course of action. If past episodes of labor environmentalism are any guide, workers won't be galvanized simply by moral outrage at the climate crisis. Rather, they will mobilize against policies that they perceive as harming both the climate and their own immediate welfare, and in favor of alternative policies that will advance their material interests. I will consider the role of the labor movement in more detail in the conclusion of this book.

More subtle forms of worker resistance could also help push capitalists to turn against fossil fuels. Fears that labor will desert a company, sector, or region can sometimes compel change, as when employers cited the need to "hold and draw the best of labor" to Pittsburgh or to recruit "competent young men" for the coal mines. There are signs that skilled workers are starting to steer clear of the fossil fuel industry, if not for moral reasons then because they see it as destined to decline. Between 2017 and 2022 the students graduating from petroleum-engineering programs dropped by 83 percent, even as oil prices rose. This decline predated COVID-19 and diverges sharply from trends in other engineering fields. Some climate organizers have begun to coordinate this effort, attending job fairs and doing other youth outreach, in what some call "recruitment pipeline disruption."[95] If financial institutions begin to fear they won't be able to attract skilled graduates due to their support of fossil fuels, it could help shift their policies.

The above analysis suggests several strategic priorities for the climate movement, which reinforce and expand upon those identified in earlier chapters. It confirms the role of disruptive minorities in forcing changes upon elites, primarily through nonelectoral means. It also illuminates important areas of polluter vulnerability. Some of the most essential sites for climate organizing will be in workplaces and among youth about to enter the work-force. Workers have a unique ability to force changes upon elites, though our movement has yet not adequately prioritized the organizing and education necessary to make militant worker action a possibility. This chapter also suggests an important role for local- and state-level mobilization targeting government regulators and legislators. Successful campaigns focused at those levels can help catalyze shifts at higher levels. Local victories can reverberate outward and upward, and surprisingly fast.

Bowron to Los Angeles City Council, included in LA City Council minutes, October 13, 1943, p. 422, https://clkrep.lacity.org/oldcfidocs/.

On this concept see George A. Gonzalez, “Urban Growth and the Politics of Air Pollution: The Establishment of California’s Automobile Emissions Standards,” *Polity* 35, no. 2 (2002): 213–36, and *The Politics of Air Pollution: Urban Growth, Ecological Modernization, and Symbolic Inclusion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). Gonzalez draws upon Harvey Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1976): 309–22.

Christine Meisner Rosen, “Businessmen against Pollution in Late Nineteenth Century Chicago,” *Business History Review* 69, no. 3 (1995): 358.

Oscar Hugh Allison, “Raymond R. Tucker: The Smoke Elimination Years, 1934–1950” (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 1978), 53, 106 (Dysart paraphrased). On Dickmann see “People: Dickmann, Bernard F.,” *Mound City on the Mississippi: A St. Louis History*, accessed July 2, 2022, https://dynamic.stlouis-mo.gov/history/peopledetail.cfm?Master_ID=983; on Dysart’s background see Walter Barlow Stevens, *Centennial History of Missouri (the Center State): One Hundred Years in the Union, 1820–1921* (St. Louis, MO: S.J. Clarke, 1921), 3: 716–19.

Scott Hamilton Dewey, *Don’t Breathe the Air: Air Pollution and U.S. Environmental Politics, 1945–1970* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 32. Implementation was delayed until 1947.

Joel A. Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 1996), 233, 259n31 (Mellon quoted); James Longhurst, *Citizen Environmentalists* (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2010), 33–38, 88 (business leader quoted).

“Pittsburgh Cracks Down on Polluters,” *Business Week*, December 27, 1969, 66.

Gonzalez, *Politics of Air Pollution*, 3 (quotes), 100–101.

Marvin Brienes, “The Fight against Smog in Los Angeles, 1943–1957” (PhD diss., University of California Davis, 1975), 117.

One 1949 warning estimated potential losses of up to $73 million a year for the tourism industry. Cited in R.D. Cadle and Henry C. Wohlers, “Smog Lore,” *Air Repair* 1, no. 4 (1952): 32.

Cadle and Wohlers, “Smog Lore,” 32; Ed Ainsworth, “Crowd Heckles Supervisors in Smog Protest,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1947 (quotes).

From the *Los Angeles Times*: “Anti-Smog Talks Mark Southside Chamber Rally,” March 21, 1947; “Group to Head Campaign against Fumes and Smoke,” December 20, 1946.

Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the* Los Angeles Times, *Its Publishers, and Their Influence on Southern California* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), 144–64, 243–44, 250.

In 1947 the oil industry hired a research firm that naturally concluded that oil was not a primary contributor to smog. See James E. Krier and Edmund Ursin, *Pollution and Policy: A Case Essay on California and Federal Experience with Motor Vehicle Air Pollution, 1940–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 80–86.

From the *Los Angeles Times*: “‘Smog’ Blanketing Los Angeles Traced to Many Sources,” October 14, 1946; Ed Ainsworth, “Eight Important Causes for Smog Found and Remedy Will Be Costly,” October 20, 1946; “This Smog Fight Is No Picnic,” December 24, 1946; and for Tucker’s report see “Text of Report and Conclusions of Smog Expert,” January 19, 1947. On the *Times* ’s role see also Brienes, “Fight against Smog,” 118–37; Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 57–60.

Dewey, *Don’t Breathe the Air*, 41. A chamber lobbyist told the supervisors that “we can’t throw obstacles in the way of those groups in our community to whom we are looking for our payrolls.”

Quoted in Dewey, *Don't Breathe the Air*, 86.
Brienes, "Fight against Smog," 117.
Quote from Preston Hotchkis in "Anti-Smog Bill Supported by State Chamber Board," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1947. On failures see also Brienes, "Fight against Smog," 88–108.
From the *Los Angeles Times*: "The Truth about Smog," December 8, 1946 (quote); Ed Ainsworth, "Divided Opinions on Smog Control Complicate Issue," November 5, 1946; "C. of C. Joins 'Times' Fight for Elimination of Smog," December 13, 1946; Ed Ainsworth, "Chamber Drops Opposition to Law Revision to Spur Battle on Smog,"April 25, 1947; "Anti-Smog Bill Supported by State Chamber Board."
From the *Los Angeles Times*: "Smog Law Asked by Citrus Region," May 5, 1947; Chester G. Hanson, "Anti-Smog Measure Passes Assembly by 73-to-1 Vote," May 8, 1947.
Harold W. Kennedy, *The History, Legal and Administrative Aspects of Air Pollution Control in the County of Los Angeles* (report to the LA County Board of Supervisors, May 9, 1954), 10. From the *Los Angeles Times*: Ed Ainsworth, "Oil Companies and Lumber Interests Reported Opposing Anti-Smog Bill," May 17, 1947; Ed Ainsworth, "Public Called on to Block Crippling of Anti-Smog Bill," May 18, 1947; "The Showdown on Smog," May 18, 1947 (quotes); Ed Ainsworth, "State Oil Companies Agree Not to Oppose Smog Bill," May 20, 1947; "Governor Signs Anti-Smog Bill," June 11, 1947.
Gonzalez, *Politics of Air Pollution*, 80.
Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 86 (1st quote); "GM Shows It's Leading the Band," *Business Week*, August 22, 1964, 25 (2nd quote).
"Detroit Bets It Can Clean Up Its Engines," *Business Week*, September 23, 1967, 88–94; Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 137–95. Between 1940 and 1956 California auto ownership grew by 136 percent and 101 percent in the United States as a whole (Krier and Ursin, *Pollution*, 92).
"GM Shows It's Leading," 25; "Detroit Bets," 89.
Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 174–75. See also Dewey, *Don't Breathe the Air*, 75–76; David Vogel, *California Greenin': How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 175.
E. Donald Elliott, Bruce A. Ackerman, and John C. Millian, "Toward a Theory of Statutory Evolution: The Federalization of Environmental Law," *Journal of Law, Economics and Organization* 1, no. 2 (1985): 326.
Autos in LA County increased 42 percent between 1956 and 1970. Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 92, 209. For continued pressure by LA county leaders at the state level see Ray Zeman, "County Urges Tougher State Auto Smog Laws," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1969.
Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 181–83. For a summary of examples see Vogel, *California Greenin'*, 181.
"Bill on Clean Air Signed by Mayor," *New York Times*, May 21, 1966; "4 States in Drive on Air Pollution," *New York Times*, December 18, 1966. Utilities' resistance to these announcements was muted, perhaps because they had already been investing in control technologies. Consolidated Edison said almost half the company's coal-burning plants were already using the control systems required by the New York City law. Clayton Knowles, "A Soft-Coal Curb in City Is Urged," *New York Times*, October 14, 1965.
Elliott, Ackerman, and Millian, "Statutory Evolution," 332. Technically the 1967 act did not impose uniform standards, but "as a practical, political matter," the industry hoped that federal guidance (in the form of "criteria") "would tend to restrain state legislation." The coal industry lobbied in favor of the bill but also worked through its powerful conduit, Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia, to

impose key amendments geared toward promoting "technological 'fixes' to pollution problems," such as smokestack scrubbers, "as opposed to encouraging switches to inherently less polluting fuels" (Elliott, Ackerman, and Millian, "Statutory Evolution," 332–33).

The 1970 legislation was technically a series of amendments to the 1963 Clean Air Act.

Tucker's testimony of March 18, 1970, in US Senate Committee on Public Works, Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution, *Air Pollution—1970, Part I: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution of the Committee on Public Works,* 91st Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1970), 241, 245. Tucker's testimony was endorsed by US Steel, Bethlehem, and other major steel companies (244).

"Study Finds Editorials Stress the Environment," *New York Times*, January 16, 1972. On newspapers' ownership interlocks with corporations see Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 24–25.

Charles E. Allen, "The Business of Pollution: The Stick and the Carrot," *Columbia Journal of World Business*, January–February 1971, 36. In 1966, for instance, "because of fly ash and soot from smokestacks, the main façade of Manhattan's New York Hilton was so badly discolored that it had to be replaced." In Los Angeles around the same time, agribusiness complained of "a serious decline in the citrus and salad crops" due to smog. "Menace in the Skies," *Time*, January 27, 1967, 50.

Allen, "Business of Pollution," 37–38.

Gottlieb and Wolt, *Thinking Big*, 244, 247 (Chandler quoted).

Ed Ainsworth, "State Oil Companies Agree Not to Oppose Smog Bill," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1947; James Farr, "Pasadena's Racist Past," *LA Progressive*, May 16, 2022.

There were limits to how far they could be pushed in the absence of a sustained and disruptive mass movement. When they did embrace policy reform they also sought to stop certain options—expanded mass transit in the case of Big Auto, renewable energy in the case of Big Coal and Oil—from being considered. On the auto industry's preclusive power see especially Gonzalez, "Urban Growth and the Politics of Air Pollution."

William F. Pedersen, "Clean Air: Regulation of Stationary Sources," in *Fifty Years at the Environmental Protection Agency: Progress, Retrenchment, and Opportunities*, ed. A. James Barnes, John D. Graham, and David M. Konisky (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 46. On the Clean Air Act's provisions see also Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 200ff; Charles O. Jones, *Clean Air: The Policies and Politics of Pollution Control* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), 175–210; John D. Graham, "Clean Air: Controls on Cars, Trucks, and Fuels," in Barnes, Graham, and Konisky, *Fifty Years*, 86–89.

For a concise summary of these examples see Chad Montrie, *The Myth of Silent Spring: Rethinking the Origins of American Environmentalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018). As Montrie stresses, environmental consciousness among workers long predated the organized movements of this period. Whereas earlier environmentalist sentiment was often channeled into conservation efforts, the newer movements were more confrontational.

Krier and Ursin, *Pollution and Policy*, 182; Dewey, *Don't Breathe the Air*, 107. A 1967 cover story in *Time* noted that "in protest against an oil company that was convicted of a pollution offense, 1,500 residents [of LA] returned their credit cards issued by the firm"; "Menace in the Skies," 51. Los Angeles groups also attempted to boycott automakers in the late 1960s; Dewey, *Don't Breathe the Air*, 106.

On this last point see Elliott, Ackerman, and Millian, "Statutory Evolution," 338 (quotes). Ralph Nader and colleagues were the most visible environmental advocates during the 1970 congressional debates, but they refused to go soft on Democratic senators like Edmund Muskie. Their public criticisms pushed the legislation significantly to the left.

Tucker testimony of March 18, 1970, p. 241. By 1969 almost all states "had laws providing for air pollution control on a statewide basis," versus just fourteen in 1963. Stanley E. Degler, *State Air Pollution Control Laws* (Washington, DC: Bureau of National Affairs, 1969), 1. On women and gendered language see Longhurst, *Citizen Environmentalists*, esp. 101–11.

"Pittsburgh Cracks Down," 66.

"Pittsburgh Cracks Down," 66 (first two quotes); Thomas Lindley Ehrich, "The 'Air War,'" *Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 1969. To be more precise, the steelworkers' fight against pollution was spearheaded by particular locals and did not get much support from the United Steelworkers' international leadership. Daniel Hannan, the Local 1557 president, complained in 1970 that at the higher levels "no one has come out publicly to support the stand I had taken on air pollution, occupational safety and health. Supervisors and local union politicians are trying to sell our members on the idea that I am trying to shut the plant down." Hannan to Michelle Madoff, January 25, 1970, in GASP files, box 4, folder 2, Archives and Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System. On Hannan see also "A Big Steel Union Makes War on Pollution," *Business Week*, December 25, 1971, 34–35. In OCAW there was stronger support from top leaders, led by Tony Mazzocchi. See Les Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work and Loved Labor: The Life and Times of Tony Mazzocchi* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2007), esp. 224–311.

"Pittsburgh Cracks Down," 66 (1st quote); Ehrich, "The 'Air War'" (William B. Tipton quoted). On the September hearings see also Longhurst, *Citizen Environmentalists*, 1, 25–26. On the Pittsburgh movement and the signal it sent to national elites see also Jones, *Clean Air*, 146–52.

Longhurst, *Citizen Environmentalists*, 55 (quote), 68–69.

Longhurst, *Citizen Environmentalists*, 44–56, 72–77, 88 (quote). The quantitative impact of this organizing on pollution is hard to measure; deindustrialization in places like Pittsburgh contributed more to emission reductions than environmentalists did (112–79).

J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000); John C. Whitaker, *Striking a Balance: Environment and Natural Resources Policy in the Nixon-Ford Years* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1976).

The estimate of twenty million is widely cited. See for example Bill Christofferson, *The Man from Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Senator Gaylord Nelson* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 1; Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, 1.

Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, 47 (Train quoted); Elliott, Ackerman, and Millian, "Statutory Evolution," 335 (2nd quote), 336; Graham, "Clean Air," 87–89. It was a fleeting moment. By 1971 Nixon shifted away from this strategy, while Muskie in 1972 "made a strategic decision not to make the environment central to his campaign" (Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment,* 134–219, quote 160).

Whitaker, *Striking a Balance*, 93.

GM President Edward Cole quoted in "The Clean-Air-Car Battle Escalates," *Business Week*, September 26, 1970, 28; Chrysler official quoted in Devra Davis, *When Smoke Ran Like Water: Tales of Environmental Deception and the Battle Against Pollution* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 116; Henry Ford II paraphrased in "Why Detroit Failed to Sway the EPA," *Business Week*, May 20, 1972, 29.

"Clean-Air-Car Battle," 28.

Whitaker, *Striking a Balance*, 101 (quote); Graham, "Clean Air," 94. In the 1960s GM had angered its competitors for a similar reason; see "GM Shows It's Leading," 24–25.

Whitaker, *Striking a Balance*, 94.

On reductions of pollutants regulated under the act see for example John Bachmann, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken: A History of the U.S. National Ambient Air Quality Standards," *Journal of the Air and Waste Management Association* 57, no. 6 (2007): 653. For an early critique of the Clean Air Act's inadequacy see Richard Walker and Michael Storper, "Erosion of the Clean Air Act of 1970: A Study in the Failure of Government Regulation and Planning," *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* 7, no. 2 (1978): 189–257. In 1990 the Clean Air Act was amended again to address acid rain and auto emission standards. The process was similar, with action beginning at the state level and motivated in large part by the economic interests of locally oriented capitalists, and polluters eventually seeking federal action to impose uniform standards. In New York State, for example, the forest resources harmed by acid rain were a focus of concern. See Bernard C. Melewski, "Acid Rain and the Adirondacks: A Legislative History," *Albany Law Review* 66, no. 1 (2002): 171–205. On the auto industry's quest for uniform standards see George A. Gonzalez, *Corporate Power and the Environment: The Political Economy of U.S. Environmental Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 97–100.

Michael Wallace, "Dying for Coal: The Struggle for Health and Safety Conditions in American Coal Mining, 1930–82," *Social Forces* 66, no. 2 (1987): 338, 340, 345.

US Bureau of the Census, *Bicentennial Edition: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1975), 606–7.

Gov. Hulett Smith quoted in Paul J. Nyden, "An Internal Colony: Labor Conflict and Capitalism in Appalachian Coal," *Insurgent Sociologist* 8, no. 4 (1979): 34; Boyle quoted in Brit Hume, *Death and the Mines: Rebellion and Murder in the United Mine Workers* (New York: Grossman, 1971), 16. For background on the UMW see also Barbara Ellen Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves: Coal Miners and the Struggle over Black Lung Disease* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), esp. 55–73; Curtis Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 42–84. In 1971 *Fortune* aptly summarized the situation in the 1950s and early 1960s: "The voice of the union in Washington was the voice of the industry, and the threat of a strike in the coalfields disappeared." Thomas O'Hanlon, "Anarchy Threatens the Kingdom of Coal," *Fortune*, January 1971, 78.

Derickson, "Down Solid: The Origins and Development of the Black Lung Insurgency," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 4, no. 1 (1983): 34; Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 101–44. Hume writes, "The lesson of the past was that, after the publicity and clamor that followed a major mine disaster had subsided, weak legislation could be passed off as strong and few would realize the difference until years later." *Death and the Mines*, 154.

Derickson, "Down Solid," 27–29; Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 75–99; James Green, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015); Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 35–86; Mitch Troutman, *The Bootleg Coal Rebellion: The Pennsylvania Miners Who Seized an Industry, 1925–1942* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2022).

Alan Derickson, *Black Lung: Anatomy of a Public Health Disaster* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 147–49, 151, 154, 157 (2nd quote), 159 (1st quote); Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 104–14.

Derickson, "Down Solid," 32; Herb Little, "Long Black Lung Act Testing Seen," *Charleston Gazette*, March 10, 1969.

From the *Charleston Gazette*: Don Marsh, "Black Lung Proposals Sail through House," March 1, 1969; Niles Jackson, "Miners Awaiting Moore's Action," March 10, 1969; Associated Press, "Moore to Sign Lung Bill—Probably Today," March 11, 1969.

From the *Charleston Gazette*: "Black Lung Strike 'Wiping Out Jobs,'" March 3, 1969; "Coal Group Calls Bill 'Galloping Socialism,'" March 1, 1969 (Paul Morton quoted).

"Lobbying with Club Harmful to Both Sides" (editorial), March 3, 1969.

The cartoon fails to capture how, in addition to those weapons, capitalists routinely use strikes and strike threats to get their way.

Derickson, *Black Lung*, 162–68.

Hume, *Death and the Mines*, 172–241; Richard Fry, "Fighting for Survival: Coal Miners and the Struggle over Health and Safety in the United States, 1968–1988" (PhD diss., Wayne State University, 2010), 125–61; Wolfgang Saxon, "W. A. Boyle Dies; Led Miners' Union," *New York Times*, June 1, 1985.

On the rise and fate of Miners for Democracy see Paul J. Nyden, "Rank-and-File Movements in the United Mine Workers of America, Early 1960s–Early 1980s," in *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below during the Long 1970s*, ed. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (London: Verso, 2010), 173–97.

Derickson, *Black Lung*, 169–70.

Lawrence L. Knudson, "Mine Inspectors Felt Too Zealous," *Charleston Gazette*, May 21, 1969; Derickson, *Black Lung*, 171–75 (quotes, 175); Ben A. Franklin, "President to Sign Mine Safety Bill Despite Doubts," *New York Times*, December 30, 1969; Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 134.

Franklin, "President to Sign Mine Safety Bill."

Derickson, *Black Lung*, 181. On the limitations see Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole*, 99–107; Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 135–41.

Corcoran testimony of March 12, 1969, in US Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Labor, *Coal Mine Health and Safety,* 91st Congress, 1st Session (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1969), 2:551, 2:556. See also Fry, "Fighting for Survival," 66–67, 130–34; Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 130–33.

Scott M. Fuess Jr. and Mark A. Loewenstein, "Further Analysis of the Theory of Economic Regulation: The Case of the 1969 Coal Mine Health and Safety Act," *Economic Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (1990): 354–89. The NCA represented about 200 out of 5,100 bituminous coal companies; see Corcoran testimony of March 12, 1969, pp. 545, 554.

"Panel Discussion on Mine Safety at the NCA Convention," June 16, 1969, p. 2, in UMW Safety Division Office Files, box 3, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University; Corcoran testimony of March 12, 1969, p. 544 (1st and last quotes); Smith, *Digging Our Own Graves*, 129, 131 (*Fortune* writer Thomas O'Hanlon quoted).

"Panel Discussion on Mine Safety," 1–2. For another Corcoran threat see Herb Little, "Price Stability Has Kept Coal Competitive," *Charleston Gazette*, August 20, 1969.

For instance, Randolph's bill omitted civil penalties for violators, though penalties were included in the final legislation. Knudson, "Mine Inspectors"; "Coal Safety Bill in Nixon Hands," *Charleston Gazette*, December 19, 1969, 18; Fry, "Fighting for Survival," 123.

In fact, the industry stopped seeking injunctions later in the decade partly "because the court orders themselves were causing strikes" (Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole*, 138). The strikes had a mixed record of success, but they do suggest that strong worker solidarity can sometimes thwart attempts at legal repression.

Wallace, "Dying for Coal," 350–51, 359 (quote). On mine worker struggles to enforce the new safety legislation see Fry, "Fighting for Survival," 161ff.

E.g., Kim Kelly, “The Young Miners Dying of ‘an Old Man’s Disease,’” *In These Times*, May 2023, 12–21.

In 2007 the US Supreme Court ruled (*Massachusetts v. EPA*) that the Clean Air Act applied to carbon emissions and that the EPA had the duty to regulate carbon accordingly. That ruling has been countered by others, mostly notably the Supreme Court’s 2022 decision (*West Virginia v. EPA*) that gutted the EPA’s ability to regulate carbon. Although the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act reiterated that carbon is a pollutant subject to regulation, right-wing judges and regulators cannot be expected to respect that provision.

E.g., “How to Revive Build Back Better,” *Bloomberg News* (online), January 26, 2022; “US Climate Rules Are Good for Business,” *Financial Times*, March 24, 2022; “Russia’s War Should Speed up Shift to Green Energy,” *Financial Times*, April 16, 2022.

Among many studies on California’s role see Roger Karapin, *Political Opportunities for Climate Policy: California, New York, and the Federal Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Vogel, *California Greenin’*.

State EPA Secretary Matt Rodriguez quoted in Matthew Garrahan, “California Sunshine Is Source of Power,” *Financial Times*, September 12, 2012. See also Vogel, *California Greenin’*, 201, 204–5.

Eric Biber, “Cultivating a Green Political Landscape: Lessons for Climate Change Policy from the Defeat of California’s Proposition 23,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 66, no. 2 (2013): 415–16, 422 (quote), 424–25. The state’s past decoupling of utility sales and profits was also an important factor. By removing utilities’ monetary incentive to maximize energy use by customers, legislators altered the posture of utility executives vis-à-vis future reforms. Biber, “Cultivating,” 416; Karapin, *Political Opportunities*, 131.

Dan Gearino, “California Just Banned Gas-Powered Cars. Here’s Everything You Need to Know,” *Inside Climate News*, September 1, 2022; Brett Marsh, “New York Is the Latest State to Ban Sales of New Gas-Powered Vehicles by 2035,” *Grist*, October 7, 2022; Coral Davenport, “California Governor Says He Will Sign Landmark Climate Disclosure Bill,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2023.

Mary Finley-Brook (professor of geography and environment, University of Richmond), interview by author, August 2022. Finley-Brook and fellow antipipeline activists in Virginia have pursued regulatory reforms in the state with this logic in mind. For other promising examples of campaigning at the state and local levels see Jeremy Brecher, “The Green New Deal in the Cities” (2 parts), Labor Network for Sustainability, June 2023; Ashley Dawson, “How to Win a Green New Deal in Your State,” *The Nation* online, May 11, 2023.

Coral Davenport, “Senate Revives Methane Rules Trump Reversed,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2021. For a similar example involving successful regulation of hydrofluorocarbons—greenhouse gases far more powerful than CO2—see Kevin A. Young, “Fossil Fuels, the Ruling Class, and Prospects for the Climate Movement,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 39 (2023): 131–32.

Justin Jacobs, “US LNG Groups Look to Boost Carbon Capture,” *Financial Times*, May 31, 2021.

Biber, “Cultivating,” 402.

Ben Beckett, “Sickouts and Strike Threats Stopped the Government Shutdown,” *Jacobin*, January 25, 2019.

Diana Li, “US College Students Are Shunning Oil-Industry Degrees for ESG Future,” *Bloomberg News* online, July 6, 2022; Grace Regullano and Mary Sweeters (Sunrise Project), interview by author, March 2022 (quote).

CONCLUSION

Building the Climate Movement We Need

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT HOW WE CAN FORCE ELITES TO CONFRONT THE FOSSIL FUEL industry. I have proposed a broad strategic orientation informed by my reading of recent climate struggles and historical movement victories. Of course, many aspects of strategy will necessarily be worked out by movements themselves. I hope the book will be read alongside other sources that engage seriously with movement strategy, both in general and in reference to the climate movement.[1] There is too little of that discussion in our labor unions, climate groups, and other progressive organizations. Too often we default to standard formulas without critically assessing them or engaging our members in that debate. Winning real reform requires that we build more participatory, more militant organizations in which people get used to fighting collectively for their interests. And until that happens, it's hard to imagine how we'll ever amass the strength necessary to replace our murderous capitalist system with a socialist alternative.[2]

This conclusion is part summary, part extension. The first section summarizes the book's main arguments. The remainder extends those arguments by addressing the connection between decarbonization and confronting structures of exploitation and oppression—what is often called "climate justice." Cutting carbon emissions and fighting for equity are sometimes falsely counterposed. One progressive climate analyst argues that causes like antiracism, immigrant rights, and feminism "may be valuable goals in themselves, but they should be treated as entirely separate from the issue of limiting climate change."[3] In this view, fighting for equity is a distraction from the imperative of cutting emissions. I disagree. Fusing these two priorities is both morally important and strategically beneficial to the goal of rapid decarbonization. I will consider two dimensions of climate justice: the struggle against environmental racism in the United States and workers' struggle for decent labor and living conditions. People of color and the working class (deeply overlapping groups, of course) must be central to the movement.

Summary

The key question is how ending carbon emissions ("decarbonization") can become politically possible. Given the fossil fuel industry's political power and deep reach throughout the economy and society, decarbonization will require that other elites collectively confront fossil fuel companies. Only then will we get public policies that bring about the death or drastic transformation of those companies. Some of the factors shaping the balance of forces among elites are beyond our control. For example, global developments like Chinese investments in renewables or the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine may push some western elites to favor more investment in decarbonization. I have focused on what we as a movement can do to accelerate that process.

I have challenged the conventional wisdom that "collective action will be most productive if it focuses on elected officials." I have also questioned the vague exhortations, often heard on the Left, that we "combine mass action and electoral work" or use an "inside-outside strategy" of mass action and polite lobbying.[4] Capitalists' political power is not fundamentally dependent on electoral politics, and neither is ours. Elections and legislative campaigns, especially at the national level, are comparatively weak instruments for the Left. Though they may on occasion serve a limited positive purpose, their typical outcome is to divert our energies from building the disruptive mass movements that can force change from both capitalists and the state. History's most successful movements, and most of their participants, have not focused on the electoral or "inside" realms. Any gains in those realms usually followed great upsurges in the fields, factories, and streets. For every Thaddeus Stevens, John L. Lewis, or Martin

Luther King Jr. who was negotiating on the inside, there were hundreds of grassroots organizers and thousands of activists on the outside.

The weaknesses of a politician-centered strategy are especially apparent on climate. Such an approach requires us to persuade the majority—in fact, an overwhelming majority given the way the US political system favors rural areas where the industry wields more power. It also requires us to convince the majority to prioritize climate when voting. Even if we do that, there is still no guarantee of victory. Because politicians are subordinate to economic elites, they routinely ignore the sentiments of the majority, climate being one example. We would do better to focus on organizing among, and in solidarity with, those groups who are in a structural position to throw a wrench in the gears: workers in our workplaces and supply chains, community residents fighting pipelines, consumers who are terrified about climate change, religious congregations, pension holders, and city residents who want their government officials to cut ties with dirty banks and insurers. Most of us belong to multiple such constituencies, so there are multiple avenues for collective action. We don't need a majority of the population actively supporting us, just a critical mass of people who possess structural power to disrupt the system.

The specific approach will vary by location and sector, but the general goal of our organizing efforts should be to collectively withhold our labor and money from capitalists who have the power to dictate orders to government. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed in 1963, "the political power structure listens to the economic power structure." All the victorious movements profiled in this book succeeded in large part because they inflicted costs on the economic power structure, usually in the form of strikes and/or boycotts. A secondary source of their power was the pressure they put on unelected state officials (military leaders, judges, regulators, and so on), from enslaved people withholding labor from Union generals to the persistent lawsuits that accompanied most of those victories. Electing and pressuring politicians was generally not their primary focus and was never the primary source of power. Similarly, the climate and Indigenous movements of this century have won their victories less by pressuring politicians than by targeting unelected elites who can impede the fossil fuel industry's activities. Banks, investors, insurance companies, regulators, and judges stand out as the most important targets in recent victories.

Often the necessary disruption originates at the local level. A decisive local victory can set off a chain reaction, both by inspiring movements elsewhere and by pushing other elites past a "tipping point" where they unify to confront the parasitic elite sector. The local level might be a military battle (e.g., Fort Monroe for abolition), a major company (GM for worker rights), a city (Birmingham for civil rights), or a state (California for air pollution controls). The dynamics of recent climate policy offer parallels, for instance in the impact of California's reforms on reform in other jurisdictions. We obviously need to accelerate that process far beyond its current pace. While there is a natural temptation to target the highest levels of policymaking, such as Washington or global climate negotiations, the cases in this book suggest that there is no substitute for disruptive local action.

Decarbonization and Climate Justice: Historical Parallels

The notion that exploitation and oppression "should be treated as entirely separate from the issue of limiting climate change" is probably not the dominant view in today's climate movement. Most recent discussions of the Green New Deal reflect a sensitivity to racial, class, and national inequalities that was missing among most white and middle-class New Dealers of the 1930s. There have been conscious attempts to build coalitions between the climate movement and organizations focused on equity, including labor unions, Indigenous nations, and community groups battling environmental racism. Many organizers have challenged the definitional line separating the "climate" and "climate justice" movements, which implicitly associates the former with middle-class whites and the latter with workers and people of color. This distinction is problematic in that working-class people of color are both the foremost victims of greenhouse gas emissions and some of the most important voices fighting for decarbonization. In the past decade there has been increased recognition of this point in much of the climate movement, even by organizations like the Sierra Club that have traditionally hewed close to the establishment.

However, since many policymakers, intellectuals, and activists still question whether a movement concerned with "limiting climate change" should also prioritize equity, the issue merits attention. As on so many other questions, historical movements against slavery, exploitation, and white supremacy have wisdom to offer us. Those histories show that confronting inequalities within the working class has strengthened, not weakened, movements against capitalists.

Early US labor unions, led by white workers in the North, debated how they should relate to enslaved workers and immigrants. After the Civil War they argued over whether they should welcome the newly freed Black workers into their ranks. On one side were all the familiar warnings against being "divisive." Many white leaders argued that newcomers threatened white workers' tenuous job security and that confronting racism would alienate the white rank and file. The same basic debate continued in later decades in regard to immigrants, workers of color, women, sexual minorities, and other oppressed segments of the working class. The language of the debate has evolved, but the essence of the warning is the same: we mustn't talk about racism or sexism or empire, nor demand special redress for the victims.

On the other side have been those who insist that addressing hierarchies within the working class is a precondition for the liberation of all workers. In 1869 a Black union leader from Baltimore, Isaac Myers, tried to convince white union organizers to join forces with workers of color. Slavery was responsible for "the degradation of white labor," he argued, the slave's ankle chained "while the other end bound you by the neck." Karl Marx made a similar argument, pointing out that the US union movement "was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." Unfortunately, most white workers did not take heed. A century later the Black feminist Frances Beal would have to make the case, yet again, that "the entire labor movement in the United States has suffered as a result of the super exploitation of black workers and women." She argued that "the liberation of these two groups is a stepping stone to the liberation of all oppressed people."[5]

History has vindicated the view of Myers, Marx, and Beal. Abolition gave an immediate boost to the northern labor movement. As Marx wrote, “out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose,” reflected in the demand for the eight-hour workday that the newly formed National Labor Union raised in 1866. This was one of the ripple effects of the slaves’ rebellion. Historian David Roediger argues that abolition gave white workers “new room and new necessity to think, imagine, and act regarding their own oppression.” The existence of southern slavery had helped legitimate the condition of wage laborers, which seemed tolerable by comparison. With chattel slavery abolished, the fiction of “free” wage labor was harder for capitalists to sustain.[6] Unfortunately the necessity of interracial cooperation would be ignored by most whites, to the detriment of all workers.

White workers made out best in those times and places when they did confront racism and other internal divisions. In the 1930s and 1940s, the industrial unions that fought against anti-Black racism (usually the ones led by Communists) often did better in their organizing drives. They also won contracts that were more favorable to all workers, as measured by indicators like grievance procedures and the right to strike. Quantitative research on worker wages has proven that “racial inequality hurts most white workers,” since racial wage differentials are correlated with lower wages across the board.[7] Other forms of “divisive” behavior are also associated with greater success. Unions with internal factions tend to get better contracts, contrary to the conventional warnings against any sort of disunity.[8] This is why employers of the late 1930s and 1940s were so worried about factionalism in unions, as noted in chapter 4.

Being divisive does not automatically weaken a movement. On the contrary, addressing internal hierarchies and divisions is often essential for success. With regard to the climate movement, the participation and support of the most vulnerable sectors is essential if we are to win. Two particularly vital sectors are communities of color and the labor movement. Why exactly are antiracism and a working-class agenda so important, and what would it mean for the climate movement to prioritize them?

Environmental Antiracism

One reason antiracism is so important is that the fossil fuel industry benefits so much from racism. Its favorite political party, the Republicans, is dependent on the deep reservoir of white supremacy and xenophobia in US society. Without constant scapegoating Republicans could not win elections. As climate breakdown proceeds, racist demagogues provide another service to the industry: they divert blame to the refugees who are expelled from their lands by drought, hurricanes, and the social and economic breakdown occasioned by decades of US foreign intervention and neoliberal policy. The solution to climate destruction thus becomes more border walls, concentration camps, and wars to control natural resources.[9]

Racism and nationalism are also essential to the industry's ability to make others pay for its activities. Without the ability to "externalize" their costs, fossil fuel companies would not be financially viable.[10] And without racism and nationalism, it would be much harder for them to externalize costs. This is true at both the domestic US and global levels. Whites are more tolerant of environmental violence when the primary victims are people of color, and residents of the Global North are more tolerant when the worst impacts are suffered in poor, predominantly nonwhite nations. Domestically, the location of new power plants, pipelines, and incinerators is determined in part by who is deemed expendable. The Dakota Access Pipeline was built upstream from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation rather than upstream from the mostly white city of Bismarck. Gas-fired power plants, which spew local "co-pollutants" like sulfur dioxide in addition to greenhouse gases, are often built in low-income communities of color.[11] The impacts of greenhouse gas emissions are distributed similarly. Across the country and the world, the economic and health costs of global heating are borne mostly by those with no power to decide policy, most of them working-class people of color.

Because the fossil fuel industry relies on racism, the movement for decarbonization will be more powerful to the extent it can undermine racism. For example, by blocking a pipeline or power plant from being built in Indigenous territory or a Black residential neighborhood, the movement makes it harder for the project to proceed at all (as happened with the

Atlantic Coast Pipeline and almost happened with the Dakota Access Pipeline; see chapter 2). By forcing power companies to reduce their emissions of both greenhouse gases and local co-pollutants, the movement raises the costs of fossil fuel combustion in general. By standing in solidarity with refugees, the movement hinders the industry's ability to evade blame. By building internationalist alliances with environmental defenders in the Global South, we limit its freedom to displace its destruction onto foreigners. These anti-racist initiatives all harm the fossil fuel industry. Whenever we limit elites' ability to externalize costs onto the vulnerable, we force them to internalize some of those costs. And the more the costs of the fossil fuel status quo are paid by elites, the faster the energy transition will be. To put it another way, shifting the distribution of harm limits how much harm is ultimately done. The vast majority of the population, whites included, will benefit.[12]

Building an antiracist climate coalition is also important for increasing our numbers. If the climate movement supports communities fighting for clean air and water, the latter are more likely to join the fight against greenhouse gases. If the climate movement mobilizes around community-owned solar and wind projects that provide affordable electricity and royalties to residents, those communities will support the energy transition.[13] Antiracism is also a powerful mobilizer for broad sectors of the population, especially youth. Overtly racist acts like the police murder of a Black person or the placement of a pipeline near Indigenous land generate a level of mass outrage that global heating still does not—witness the many millions who filled the streets after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, or those who protested the Dakota Access Pipeline out of concern for Indigenous rights rather than carbon emissions. Although greenhouse gas emissions kill far more Black and Indigenous people than police do, they remain abstract for many people. This puts the climate movement at a disadvantage with respect to recruiting. But it also gives us added reason to make antiracism central to our work.

A Working-Class Movement

These same principles apply to labor. Some climate advocates would argue that tacking progressive economic demands onto climate reform makes it harder to achieve rapid decarbonization. Their logic is superficially appealing, in that prolabor demands may make business more resistant to decarbonizing. But like the argument against the climate movement prioritizing antiracism, this view is both morally and strategically flawed. The climate movement is stronger when it embraces a clear progressive economic agenda, including by fighting for a "just transition" for workers in high-polluting industries, and when it allocates time and resources to organizing in and alongside the labor movement. Workers, unionized or not, have played a crucial role in most major progressive victories in US history. They must play that role in the climate fight too.

The first reason workers are so important is their structural position. Workers have unique power to force elites to bear the costs of fossil fuels. Even if they are not climate conscious, strong unions force employers to internalize more of the costs of the status quo. One of the main impacts of climate destruction is austerity, through which elites everywhere try to make workers pay the price. By preventing employers from shifting costs onto workers in the form of austerity, unions can force employers into confrontation with other elite sectors.

Of course, it's much better when unions *are* climate conscious. Those that educate and organize their members around climate demands can exert direct pressure on employers to cut their emissions. They can also put pressure on other powerful targets, such as banks and insurers, by withdrawing their own capital from those institutions and pushing employers to do the same. Striking against climate destruction, and on behalf of green investments and regulations, is the ultimate labor weapon. The capacity to strike will have to be built through diligent workplace organizing that mobilizes people around both their direct material concerns and climate consciousness. Right now, activists within the labor movement can start by incorporating things like divestment, energy efficiency, retrofitting of buildings, workplace air purity, and employer support for public transit into contract negotiations. When those demands are on the bargaining table (even if the bosses scoff at them), they can be used to educate and engage rank-and-file members. With some exceptions the US labor movement has not yet risen to this challenge. Even progressive unions have mostly confined their efforts to pro–Green New Deal resolutions. But the widespread support for such policies among union workers is a hopeful sign.[14] If union resolutions are treated as organizing and educational tools rather than one-time symbolic acts, they could help galvanize real collective action. In some cases, existing union leaders may be supportive of this approach. However, building a working-class climate movement requires that we center the union rank and file. Union members need the experience of discussing, strategizing, and taking collective action against their bosses. In many cases rank-and-file challengers will need to organize and toss out current leaders if they want to change their unions from within.[15]

Unions are also important for the political constituency they represent. Polluters are adept at pitting the working class against environmentalists by threatening disinvestment, which implies layoffs and higher energy prices. Any climate reform that shoulders workers with the costs of the transition—for instance, a carbon tax that does not rebate the proceeds to consumers, as President Macron tried to do in France in 2018—risks driving workers into the industry's camp. Insofar as the climate movement roots itself in the working class and mobilizes in solidarity with workers' fights for good jobs, wages, and benefits, it undermines polluters' ability to rally workers in their defense. Getting unions on board creates additional pressure for green investments and regulations or at least neutralizes a potential source of opposition. Although unions don't carry nearly as much political weight as capitalists do, support or opposition from the unions directly affected by a proposed law, regulation, or investment project can sometimes make or break its chances.[16]

Uniting the labor and climate movements is difficult, but coalitions are possible. The example of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) union shows that coalitions can even be built in the high-polluting industries. Starting in the 1960s OCAW targeted employers over their simultaneous endangerment to workers and to outside communities.[17] Some labor and climate organizers today are trying a similar approach.

Geographer Matthew Huber offers one strategic proposal that centers on electric utility workers. The sector is in many ways a natural ally for the climate movement. Electric workers are highly unionized, would benefit from Green New Deal–style investments in electrical infrastructure, and are strategically positioned to exercise leverage over utility companies and governments. Drawing from OCAW's example, Huber argues we "must start with the more practical workplace concerns of the workers themselves," especially safety on the job, and "connect these visceral issues of worker safety to the issue of climate change, or *planetary safety*," through political education among union members and the community. A coalition of utility workers and customers could be built around the demand for public ownership of utilities, which would make decarbonization easier.[18]

Union members in many other industries can apply a similar approach, adjusted to their particular settings. The labor movement is much more than just the mining and building trades sectors (overwhelmingly white men) who are often prioritized in discussions about the energy transition. The key impetus for action may come from other sectors that contain higher percentages of women, people of color, and progressives. It's conceivable that one or more sectors of workers (nurses? longshore workers? educators? flight attendants? tech workers? transit workers?) could go on strike, or credibly threaten to strike, to force changes to government energy policies. These sectors have been some of the most active and dynamic portions of the working class in recent years.

Furthermore, they all have the power to disrupt the economy. Not all of them are *equally* well positioned to do so: port or railroad workers can shut things down more easily than educators or care workers. Labor unions need to identify the strategic "seams" in the networks of production, logistics, and distribution—the places where capital is most vulnerable to worker and community disruption—and prioritize organizing in those spots.[19] For the climate movement, building relationships with those workers is at least as important as befriending the fossil fuel workers who will be displaced by the energy transition. Yet workers outside those seams can wield disruptive power of their own. When educators go on strike, family members everywhere must absent themselves from their own jobs, which disrupts numerous industries.[20] Those of us who work in "nonstrategic" sectors like education can do important climate work in our respective locations.

In trying to win over fossil fuel or building trades workers, we should not lose sight of the structural power that other workers hold. This point is especially important because an overemphasis on coalition-building can lead us to water down our demands. Environmental organizers have sometimes fallen into this trap.[21] Yes, we should work hard to get the coal miners and pipe fitters on our side, but not at all costs. We must mobilize in support of high labor standards on wind and solar farms and fight for robust transition assistance for workers in the fossil fuel industries. But we should not temper our other demands to mollify unions that insist on burning more coal or building more pipelines.[22]

We must also remember that the working class is broader than the unionized workforce and that workers themselves are also residents, tenants, debtors, mortgage holders, and consumers. In addition to organizing in workplaces and with labor unions, the climate movement must also root itself in the broader working class. Much of this organizing work will be done outside the workplace. One strategic priority should be organizing with community-based groups around energy, transportation, housing, food access, and other aspects of daily life that have climate implications. As mentioned above, the construction of solar and wind energy projects on public land and rooftops could provide affordable electricity and royalties to residents. Such projects would give working- and middle-class residents a positive material stake in the energy transition. This model has had notable success in a few countries but has barely been tried in the United States.[23]

The Future and the Past

The near future will bring devastating climate violence. Ecological breakdown will tend to magnify all the preexisting hierarchies of class, race, gender, nation, and ability, in a "catastrophic convergence" of pernicious forces.[24] Yet our actions will be crucial in determining what happens, including how much atmospheric heating occurs, who is made to suffer for it, and how the benefits and costs of a green transition are distributed. Our movement must confront greenhouse gas emissions as well as the institutions that shoulder the innocent with the costs. This is a matter of both morality and good strategy. Building a multiracial, working-class climate movement is a prerequisite for winning a global green transition that is both rapid and equitable. Our success or failure will help determine whether the coming decades bring more savagery and violence or, alternatively, a warmer but still livable planet where values like dignity, health, cooperation, and diplomacy prevail.

In this historic war for survival our movement ancestors have much to teach us. We should take inspiration from those heroes of the past (and present) who have overcome long odds to achieve greater justice. In addition to their courageous moral examples, they show us how capitalists can be defeated. They also offer clues about how capitalism itself can be defeated. Though they didn't always oppose capitalism altogether, their struggles provide us with important lessons for doing so. Building the combative mass movements that can win victories over particular capitalists is a prerequisite for winning the socialist system we all deserve.

Among many good works on organizing and strategy see Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, and Jane Slaughter, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* (Brooklyn, NY: Labor Education and Research Project, 2016); Eric Mann, *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer* (Boston: Beacon, 2011); Steve Williams, *Demand Everything: Lessons of the Transformative Organizing Model* (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2013); Chris Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013); Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning, *Re:Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017); CounterPower, *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation* (Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions, 2020); Benjamin S. Case, *Street Rebellion: Resistance Beyond Violence and Nonviolence* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2022); John Womack, Jr., *Labor Power and Strategy*, ed. Peter Olney and Glenn Perušek (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2023).Aspects of climate strategy are treated in CounterPower, New York branch, *A Flame against the Fire: An Ecological Program for Revolutionary Movements* (December 2019), https://counterpower.info; Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (London: Verso, 2022); Cynthia Kaufman, *The Sea Is Rising and So Are We: A*

Climate Justice Handbook (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2021); Jeremy Brecher, *Against Doom: A Climate Insurgency Manual* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017); Hilary Moore and Joshua Kahn Russell, *Organizing Cools the Planet: Tools and Reflections to Navigate the Climate Crisis* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011); Andreas Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (London: Verso, 2021).

We can lay the foundations for systemic alternatives right now, including by building worker cooperatives, popular assemblies, and other counterinstitutions. But the level of mass struggle needs to intensify before most working people will come to consider those alternatives necessary and viable. For revolutionary strategy see CounterPower, *Organizing for Autonomy*, and CounterPower New York, *Flame against the Fire*.

Anatol Lieven, *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Case for Nationalism in a Warming World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), xxv.

Quotes from, respectively, Edwin Amenta, Neil Caren, and Sheera Joy Olasky, "Age for Leisure? Political Mediation and the Impact of the Pension Movement on US Old-Age Policy," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 3 (2005): 522; Eric Blanc, "Why Kautsky Was Right (and Why You Should Care)," *Jacobin*, April 2, 2019; Richard Moser, "Introduction to the Inside/Outside Strategy," accessed October 27, 2022, https://befreedom.co.

David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London: Verso, 2014), 112 (Marx quoted), 120 (Myers quoted); Frances Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (1969), reprinted in Third World Women's Alliance, *Black Women's Manifesto* (n.d.), https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01009. For further discussion see Megan L. Jordan, Joshua Murray, Michael Schwartz, and Kevin A. Young, "When Black Movements Win, Everybody but the 1% Wins," *Truthout*, December 24, 2020.

Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*, 112.

Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 212–65; Cliff Brown and John Brueggemann, "Mobilizing Interracial Solidarity: A Comparison of the 1919 and 1937 Steel Industry Labor Organizing Drives," *Mobilization* 2, no. 1 (1997): 47–70; Michael Reich, *Racial Inequality: A Political-Economic Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 268 (quote).

Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Left Out*, 159–88.

Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2011); Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2017); Kevin A. Young, "Will Climate Change Make Family Separations the Norm?" *Truthout*, August 25, 2018; Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021); Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso, 2021).

See introduction, note 44.

Amy Dalrymple, "Pipeline Route First Called for Crossing North of Bismarck," *Bismarck Tribune* online, August 18, 2016; "Bismarck Residents Didn't Even Have to Fight to Re-Route the Dakota Access Pipeline," *The Takeaway* (WNYC radio), November 30, 2016. On power plants see Bridget Diana, Michael Ash, and James K. Boyce, *Green for All: Integrating Air Quality and Environmental Justice into the Clean Energy Transition* (Amherst, MA: PERI, 2021).

For studies supporting this point see Michael Ash, James K. Boyce, Grace Chang, and Helen Scharber, "Is Environmental Justice Good for White Folks? Industrial Air Toxics Exposure in Urban America," *Social Science Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (2013): 616–36; James K. Boyce, "The Environmental

Consequences of Inequality," PERI Working Paper no. 559, April 2022; Kevin P. Josey, Scott W. Delaney, Xiao Wu, Rachel C. Nethery, Priyanka DeSouza, Danielle Braun, and Francesca Dominici, "Air Pollution and Mortality at the Intersection of Race and Social Class," *New England Journal of Medicine* 388 (2023): 1396–1404. Decarbonization itself also entails global costs, such as pollution from lithium or cobalt mines. This underscores the importance of international, and not just interracial, solidarity. See Kate Aronoff, Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos, *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (London: Verso, 2019), 139–69; Jayati Ghosh, Shouvik Chakraborty, and Debamanyu Das, "Climate Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century," *Monthly Review* 7, no. 3 (2022), 70–85.

David McDermott Hughes, *Who Owns the Wind? Climate Crisis and the Hope of Renewable Energy* (London: Verso, 2021), and "What If the Wind and Sunshine Belonged to Everyone?" *The Nation*, May 30–June 6, 2022, 24–27.

A 2019 poll found that 62 percent of current union members support a Green New Deal, versus 50 percent of nonmembers. Sean McElwee, Julian Brave NoiseCat, and John Ray, "Memo: Green New Deal Support among Union Members," Data for Progress, June 2019.

Huber, *Climate Change*, 263–81. On this "rank-and-file strategy," see also Kim Moody, *The Rank and File Strategy: Building a Socialist Movement in the US* (Solidarity, 2000), www.solidarity-us.org; Ryan Pollock, "The Case for an Ecosocialist Rank and File Strategy in the Building Trades," *The Trouble*, November 28, 2019. A detailed recent strategic program is CounterPower, "A Draft Program for the US Labor Movement," 2022, https://counterpower.info.

For some promising examples see Sean Sweeney, "Trade Unions and Just Transition: The Search for a Transformative Politics," Trade Unions for Energy Democracy Working Paper no. 11 (2018): 30–41; Paul Prescod, "New York's Building Trades Unions Are Showing the Way Forward on Green Jobs," *Jacobin*, December 8, 2020; Dharna Noor, "This Old Steel Mill Town Is Now a Hub for Green Energy," *In These Times*, May 3, 2021; Nicholas Kusnetz, "A Just Transition? On Brooklyn's Waterfront, Oil Companies and Community Activists Join Together to Create an Offshore Wind Project—and Jobs," *Inside Climate News*, May 9, 2021; Huber, *Climate Change*, 257–81; Todd E. Vachon, *Clean Air and Good Jobs: U.S. Labor and the Struggle for Climate Justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023); Luca GoldMansour, "How New York's Democratic Socialists Brought Unions around to Public Renewables," *American Prospect* online, June 20, 2023; Keith Brower Brown, "Auto Workers Power Up Fight for an Electric Future," *Labor Notes* online, October 16, 2023. See also the websites of the Labor Network for Sustainability, https://www.labor4sustainability.org, and Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, https://www.tuedglobal.org.

Les Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work and Loved Labor: The Life and Times of Tony Mazzocchi* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2007), 224–311.

Huber, *Climate Change*, 221–81 (quotes, 267–68).

For exploration of these issues, albeit not in reference to climate, see Womack, *Labor Power*. The Strategic Corporate Research website founded by Tom Juravich offers excellent tools for identifying capitalist vulnerabilities; see https://strategiccorporateresearch.org.

Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113–19.

David McDermott Hughes (past president and climate justice chair, American Association of University Professors/American Federation of Teachers, Rutgers University), interview by author, December 2022.

In any coalition, strengthening one's own forces can improve the chances of building a relationship with others. As the climate movement within organized labor grows and as decarbonization accelerates, unions in the high-polluting sectors will likely become more receptive to our outreach.

Hughes, *Who Owns the Wind?* and "What If the Wind." On Germany see Craig Morris and Arne Jungjohann, *Energy Democracy: Germany's Energiewende to Renewables* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Christian Parenti's powerful book *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* uses this term in a more specific sense, referring to how neoliberalism intensifies climate chaos and impedes society's ability to respond.

Suggested Resources

THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES OFFER USEFUL DATA, RESEARCH TOOLS, AND INFORMATION on the sort of climate action advocated in this book. This list is US-centric and represents just a small sample of the relevant resources. Some of the most important and creative campaigns are being spearheaded by independent local groups not listed here.

Banking on Climate Chaos (https://www.bankingonclimatechaos.org) provides annually updated data on banks' connections to fossil fuels.

Global Energy Monitor (https://globalenergymonitor.org) compiles a database of major energy projects.

Honor the Earth (https://honorearth.org) is a national Indigenous organization "that provides both financial support and organizing support to Native environmental initiatives."

Insure Our Future (https://global.insure-our-future.com) annually updates a database on insurance companies' connections to fossil fuels plus information about campaigns.

Labor Network for Sustainability (https://www.labor4sustainability.org) is a great resource for labor organizers who want to organize around climate, health, safety, and related demands.

Mazaska Talks (https://mazaskatalks.org) is an Indigenous-led network promoting institutional divestment from financial institutions tied to fossil fuels. Mazaska means "Money" in Lakota.

Oil and Gas Policy Tracker (https://oilgaspolicytracker.org) provides a searchable database on financial institutions' policies on fossil fuels.

Private Equity Stakeholder Project (https://pestakeholder.org) monitors the private equity industry with the goal of "empowering communities, working families, and others impacted by private equity investments."
Rainforest Action Network (https://www.ran.org) targets the financial enablers of fossil fuels and deforestation via public campaigns.
Stop the Money Pipeline (https://stopthemoneypipeline.com) is a coalition focused on targeting the financial sector. Its website includes a "local partner map" to connect activists with each other.
Strategic Corporate Research (https://strategiccorporateresearch.org) is a fantastic resource for researching business targets and planning campaigns.
Third Act (https://thirdact.org) is an organization for people over sixty, largely focused on stopping banks from funding fossil fuels.
Toolkit for Municipal Divestment (https://bit.ly/climatedivest) is a guide for getting your city or town to cut ties with financial institutions that support fossil fuels. See also the "Divestment Toolkit for Local Governments" available at https://bouldercounty.gov/climate/divestment.
Treaty Alliance against Tar Sands Expansion (https://www.treatyalliance.org) is an Indigenous coalition against fossil fuel infrastructure.

Acknowledgments

THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE SHAPED MY ANALYSIS OF POWER—WHETHER THROUGH our personal exchanges, their writings, or their actions—are too numerous to mention here. Some of those debts will be apparent to careful readers of footnotes. A few people merit special recognition given their direct contributions to the project. Sasha Lilley at PM was an exemplary editor. She encouraged me from the start, pushed me to refine my argument, and gave detailed feedback at each stage. Conversations with Michael Schwartz and the late Richard Lachmann inspired some of the initial research. The book's general thesis about capitalists, the state, and social movements owes a great debt to Michael's insights over the years. Richard, Jerry Levinsky, Joseph Peschek, and Diana Sierra Becerra all read portions of the text and offered valuable comments. I am also grateful to those who granted me interviews, including Christa Clapp, Gordon Clark, Madison Condon, Mary Finley-Brook, David McDermott Hughes, Jeremy Kress, Robert Pollin, Grace Regullano, Steven Rothstein, Yevgeny Shrago, Elana Sulakshana, Mary Sweeters, Ayako Yasuda, and several anonymous informants. Douglas Yarrow kindly gave me permission to use his photographs of the 1969 coal miners' strike in West Virginia, which appear in chapter 6. I also thank the staff at the archives cited in the notes, especially Hagley Museum and Library, the Special Collections Library at Pennsylvania State University, and the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as Marjorie McNinch for scanning some of the Hagley documents.

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Page numbers in *italic* refer to illustrations. "Passim" (literally "scattered") indicates intermittent discussion of a topic over a cluster of pages.

About the Author

KEVIN A. YOUNG TEACHES HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST. He has published several other books, including *Levers of Power: How the 1% Rules and What the 99% Can Do About It* (with Tarun Banerjee and Michael Schwartz) and the edited volume *Making the Revolution: Histories of the Latin American Left*. His writing is available at https://kevinyoung.org.

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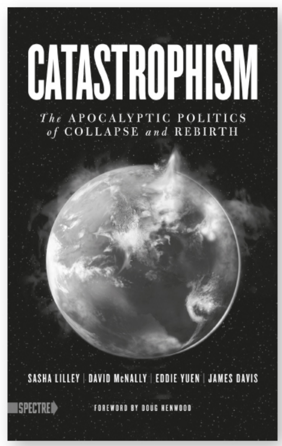
From SPECTRE from PM Press

Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth

Sasha Lilley, David McNally, Eddie Yuen, and James Davis with a foreword by Doug Henwood

ISBN: 978–1–60486–589–9
$16.00   192 pages



We live in catastrophic times. The world is reeling from the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, with the threat of further meltdowns ever-looming. Global warming and myriad dire ecological disasters worsen—with little if any action to halt them—their effects rippling across the planet in the shape of almost biblical floods, fires, droughts, and hurricanes. Governments warn that no alternative exists than to take the bitter medicine they prescribe—or risk devastating financial or social collapse. The right, whether religious or secular, views the present as catastrophic and wants to turn the clock back. The left fears for the worst, but hopes some good will emerge from the rubble. Visions of the apocalypse and predictions of impending doom abound. Across the political spectrum, a culture of fear reigns.

Catastrophism explores the politics of apocalypse—on the left and right, in the environmental movement, and from capital and the state—and examines why the lens of catastrophe can distort our understanding of the dynamics at the heart of these numerous disasters—and fatally impede our ability to transform the world. Lilley, McNally, Yuen, and Davis probe the reasons why catastrophic thinking is so prevalent, and challenge the belief that it is only out of the ashes that a better society may be born. The authors argue that those who care about social justice and the environment should eschew the Pandora's box of fear—even as it relates to indisputably apocalyptic climate change. Far from calling people to arms, they suggest, catastrophic fear often results in passivity and paralysis—and, at worst, reactionary politics.

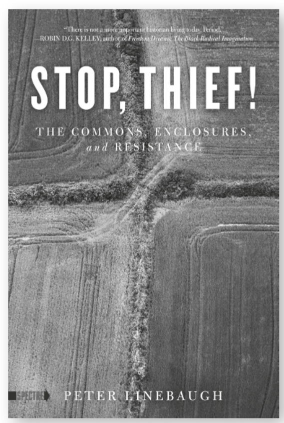
“This groundbreaking book examines a deep current—on both the left and right—of apocalyptical thought and action. The authors explore the origins, uses, and consequences of the idea that collapse might usher in a better world. **Catastrophism** ***is a crucial guide to understanding our tumultuous times, while steering us away from the pitfalls of the past.”***
—Barbara Epstein, author of *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s*

From SPECTRE from PM Press

Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance

Peter Linebaugh

ISBN: 978–1–60486–747–3
$21.95   304 pages



In this majestic tour de force, celebrated historian Peter Linebaugh takes aim at the thieves of land, the polluters of the seas, the ravagers of the forests, the despoilers of rivers, and the removers of mountaintops. Scarcely a society has existed on the face of the earth that has not had commoning at its heart. “Neither the state nor the market,” say the planetary commoners. These essays kindle the embers of memory to ignite our future commons.

From Thomas Paine to the Luddites, from Karl Marx—who concluded his great study of capitalism with the enclosure of commons—to the practical dreamer William Morris—who made communism into a verb and advocated communizing industry and agriculture—to the 20th-century communist historian E.P. Thompson, Linebaugh brings to life the vital commonist tradition. He traces the red thread from the great revolt of commoners in 1381 to the enclosures of Ireland, and the American commons, where European immigrants who had been expelled from their commons met the immense commons of the native peoples and the underground African-American urban commons. Illuminating these struggles in this indispensable collection, Linebaugh reignites the ancient cry, “STOP, THIEF!”

“There is not a more important historian living today. Period.”
—Robin D.G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

"E.P. Thompson, you may rest now. Linebaugh restores the dignity of the despised luddites with a poetic grace worthy of the master … [A] commonist manifesto for the 21st century."
—Mike Davis, author of *Planet of Slums*

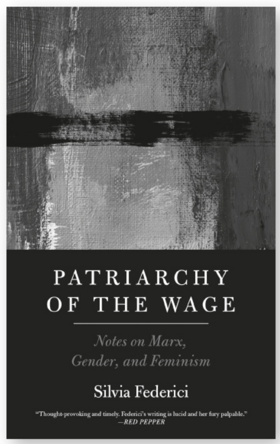
"Peter Linebaugh's great act of historical imagination … takes the cliché of 'globalization' and makes it live. The local and the global are once again shown to be inseparable—as they are, at present, for the machine-breakers of the new world crisis."
—T.J. Clark, author of *Farewell to an Idea*

From SPECTRE from PM Press

Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism

Silvia Federici

ISBN: 978–1–62963–799–0
$15.00   152 pages



At a time when socialism is entering a historic crisis and we are witnessing a worldwide expansion of capitalist relations, a feminist rethinking of Marx's work is vitally important. In *Patriarchy of the Wage*, Silvia Federici, bestselling author and the most important Marxist feminist of our time, asks why Marx and the Marxist tradition were so crucial in their denunciation of capitalism's exploitation of human labor and blind to women's work and struggle on the terrain of social reproduction. Why was Marx unable to anticipate the profound transformations in the proletarian family that took place at the turn of the nineteenth century creating a new patriarchal regime?

In this fiery collection of penetrating essays published here for the first time, Federici carefully examines these questions and in the process has provided an expansive redefinition of work, class, and class-gender relations. Seeking to delineate the specific character of capitalist "patriarchalism," this magnificently original approach also highlights Marx's and the Marxist tradition's problematic view of industrial production and the State in the struggle for human liberation. Federici's lucid argument that most reproductive work is irreducible to automation is a powerful reminder of the poverty of the revolutionary imagination that consigns to the world of machines the creation of the material conditions for a communist society.

Patriarchy of the Wage does more than just redefine classical Marxism; it is an explosive call for a new kind of communism. Read this book and realize the power and importance of reproductive labor!

“Silvia Federici’s work embodies an energy that urges us to rejuvenate struggles against all types of exploitation and, precisely for that reason, her work produces a common: a common sense of the dissidence that creates a community in struggle.”
—Maria Mies, coauthor of *Ecofeminism*

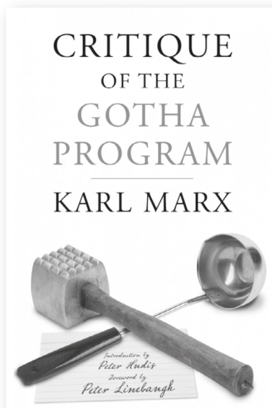
“Federici has become a crucial figure for young Marxists, political theorists, and a new generation of feminists.”
—Rachel Kushner author of *The Flamethrowers*

From SPECTRE from PM Press

Critique of the Gotha Program

Karl Marx
with an Introduction by Peter Hudis and a Foreword by Peter Linebaugh

ISBN: 978–1–62963–916–1
$15.95   156 pages



Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* is a revelation. It offers the fullest elaboration of his vision for a communist future, free from the shackles of capital, but also the state. Neglected by the statist versions of socialism, whether Social Democratic or Stalinist that left a wreckage of coercion and disillusionment in their wake, this new annotated translation of Marx's Critique makes clear for the first time the full emancipatory scope of Marx's notion of life after capitalism. An erudite new introduction by Peter Hudis plumbs the depth of Marx's argument, elucidating how his vision of communism, and the transition to it, was thoroughly democratic. At a time when the rule of capital is being questioned and challenged, this volume makes an essential contribution to a real alternative to capitalism, rather than piecemeal reforms. In the twenty-first century, when it has never been more needed, here is Marx at his most liberatory.

"This is a compelling moment for a return to Marx's most visionary writings. Among those is his often neglected, **Critique of the Gotha Program.** ***In this exciting new translation, we can hear Marx urging socialists of his day to remain committed to a truly radical break with capitalism. And in Peter Hudis's illuminating introductory essay we are reminded that Marx's vision of a society beyond capitalism was***

democratic and emancipatory to its very core. This book is a major addition to the anti-capitalist library."
—David McNally, Distinguished Professor of History, University of Houston and author of *Monsters of the Market*

"In their penetrating account of Marx's famous hatchet job on the 19th-century left, Hudis and Anderson go to the heart of issues haunting the left in the 21st century: what would a society look like without work, wages, GDP growth, and human self-oppression."
—Paul Mason, writer for *New Statesman* and author of *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*

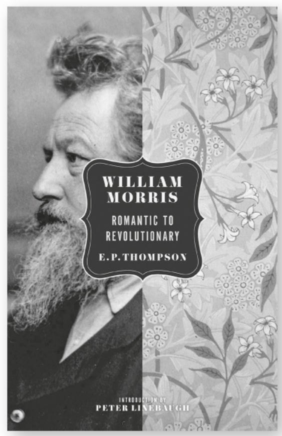
"**Critique of the Gotha Program** ***is a key text for understanding Marx's vision of an emancipated society beyond capitalism. With an excellent introduction by Peter Hudis, this new translation is both timely and important. Returning to Marx's pathbreaking essay can give new direction to the political struggles of our time."***
—Martin Hägglund, Yale University, author of *This Life*

From SPECTRE CLASSICS from PM Press

William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary

E.P. Thompson

ISBN: 978–1–60486–243–0
$32.95   880 pages



William Morris—the great 19th-century craftsman, architect, designer, poet and writer—remains a monumental figure whose influence resonates powerfully today. As an intellectual (and author of the seminal utopian *News from Nowhere*), his concern with artistic and human values led him to cross what he called the “river of fire” and become a committed socialist—committed not to some theoretical formula but to the day-by-day struggle of working women and men in Britain and to the evolution of his ideas about art, about work and about how life should be lived. Many of his ideas accorded none too well with the reforming tendencies dominant in the labour movement, nor with those of “orthodox” Marxism, which has looked elsewhere for inspiration. Both sides have been inclined to venerate Morris rather than to pay attention to what he said. Originally written less than a decade before his groundbreaking *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson brought to this biography his now trademark historical mastery, passion, wit, and essential sympathy. It remains unsurpassed as the definitive work on this remarkable figure, by the major British historian of the 20th century.

“Two impressive figures, William Morris as subject and E.P. Thompson as author, are conjoined in this immense biographical-historical-critical study, and both of them have gained in stature since the first edition of the book was published … The book that was ignored in 1955 has meanwhile become something of an underground classic—almost impossible to locate in second-hand bookstores, pored over in

libraries, required reading for anyone interested in Morris and, increasingly, for anyone interested in one of the most important of contemporary British historians … Thompson has the distinguishing characteristic of a great historian: he has transformed the nature of the past, it will never look the same again; and whoever works in the area of his concerns in the future must come to terms with what Thompson has written. So too with his study of William Morris."
—Peter Stansky, *The New York Times Book Review*

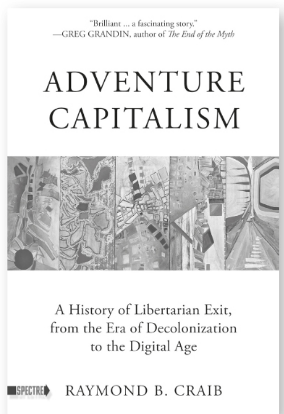
"An absorbing biographical study … A glittering quarry of marvelous quotes from Morris and others, many taken from heretofore inaccessible or unpublished sources."
—Walter Arnold, *Saturday Review*

From SPECTRE from PM Press

Adventure Capitalism: A History of Libertarian Exit, from the Era of Decolonization to the Digital Age

Raymond Craib

ISBN: 978–1–62963–917–8
$24.95   304 pages



Imagine a capitalist paradise. An island utopia governed solely by the rules of the market and inspired by the fictions of Ayn Rand and Robinson Crusoe. Sound far-fetched? It may not be. The past half century is littered with the remains of such experiments in what Raymond Craib calls "libertarian exit." Often dismissed as little more than the dreams of crazy, rich Caucasians, exit strategies have been tried out from the southwest Pacific to the Caribbean, from the North Sea to the high seas, often with dire consequences for local inhabitants. Based on research in archives in the US, the UK, and Vanuatu, as well as in FBI files acquired through the Freedom of Information Act, Craib explores in careful detail the ideology and practice of libertarian exit and its place in the histories of contemporary cap italism, decolonization, empire, and oceans and islands. *Adventure Capitalism* is a global history that intersects with an array of figures: Fidel Castro and the Koch brothers, American segregationists and Melanesian socialists, Honolulu-based real estate speculators and British Special Branch spies, soldiers of fortune and English lords, Orange County engineers and Tongan navigators, CIA operatives and CBS news executives, and a new breed of techno-utopians and an old guard of Honduran coup leaders. This is not only a history of our time but, given the new iterations of privatized exit—seasteads, free private cities, and space colonization—it is also a history of our future.

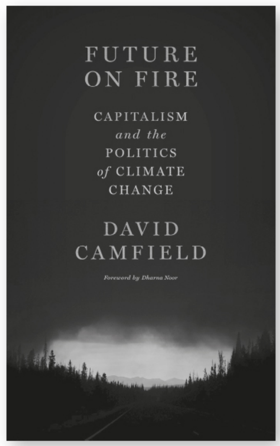
"The libertarian quest for 'land no one is using' inevitably finds 'land that is used by all,' and the ugly conflation of the two sends the champions of personal liberty in search of guns, indentured servants, and death squads."
—Cory Doctorow

"They don't like hobbles and they can't stand fences, and so today's libertarian frontiersmen are looking for land, lots of land, perhaps in New Zealand. Or maybe they'll jet to Mars, build cities in the thick of Honduras or string barges together and create a floating republic, anything to avoid regulations, laws, and oversights. Ray Craib's brilliant **Adventure Capitalism** ***is a fascinating story of some spectacular fiascos, but it also makes a more profound point: there does exist a class of super-billionaires so rich they'd rather leave the world in ruins than admit humans are social beings and our survival requires recognition that we need each other."***
—Greg Grandin

Future on Fire: Capitalism and the Politics of Climate Change

David Camfield with a Foreword by Dharna Noor

ISBN: 978–1–62963–937–6
$15.95   128 pages



Climate change is already affecting millions of people. Governments talk about taking action to limit global warming to 2°C above preindustrial levels, but the greenhouse gas emissions allowed by their policies have the Earth on track to far exceed that by the end of the century—a truly disastrous path. Visionary plans abound for how to slash emissions and improve society at the same, including various Green New Deals, but how can we make these urgently needed changes?

Future on Fire argues that a just transition from fossil fuels and other drivers of climate change will not be delivered by businesspeople or politicians who support the status quo. Electing green left leaders will not be enough to overcome opposition from capitalists and state bureaucrats. Only the power of disruptive mass social movements has the potential to pressure governments to change, so supporters of climate justice should commit to building them. Confronting the question "What if warming above 2° becomes unavoidable?" and refusing to despair, David Camfield argues that even a ravaged planet is worth fighting for—and that ultimately the only solution to the ecological crisis created by capitalism is a transition to ecosocialism.

"At last, a book that can be shared with anyone awakening to the urgency of climate justice. In clear and accessible prose, **Future on Fire** ***shows us why we are in an ecological crisis—and what it will take to move beyond it. With meticulous care,***

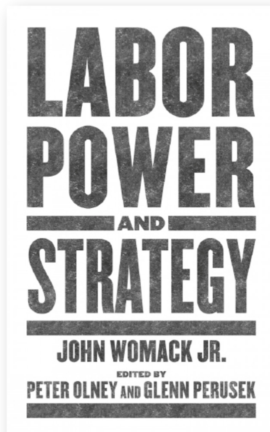
David Camfield lays out sharp and compelling arguments for building mass movements that set their sights on ecosocialism. Spread the word!”
—David McNally, Cullen Distinguished Professor of History and Business, University of Houston, and author of *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance*

“Naomi Klein says only mass movements can save us from climate catastrophe. In this clear, concise, and absolutely convincing book, David Camfield shows why that is, and how we can build an effective movement to stop capitalism’s deadly assault on our planet. Essential reading for every climate activist.”
—Ian Angus, author of *Facing the Anthropocene* and editor of climateandcapitalism.com

Labor Power and Strategy

John Womack Jr.
Edited by Peter Olney and Glenn Perusek

ISBN: 978–1–62963–974–1
$16.95   192 pages



What would it take to topple Amazon? To change how health care works in America? To break up the media monopolies that have taken hold of our information and imaginations? How is it possible to organize those without hope working on the margins? In *Labor Power and Strategy*, legendary strategist, historian and labor organizer John Womack, speaks directly to a new generation, providing rational, radical, experience-based perspectives that help target and run smart, strategic, effective campaigns in the working class.

In this sleek, practical, pocket inspiration, Womack lays out a timely plan for identifying chokepoints and taking advantage of supply chain issues in order to seize and build labor power and solidarity. Interviewed by Peter Olney of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union—Womack's lively, illuminating thoughts are built upon by ten young labor organizers and educators, whose responses create a rich dialogue and open a space for joyful, achievable change. With stories of triumph that will bring readers to tears this back-pocket primer is an instant classic.

"In Our Revolution we shout, 'When we Organize, We Win,' but organize who and win what?* Labor Power and Strategy *is a great collection of Womack and 10 organizers debating strategic workplace organizing vs associational or more general organizing at workplaces or in communities. Womack, in a long initial interview and in the conclusion, argues that without organizing workplace chokepoints, we are left with the spontaneous movements that come and go. Several of the 10 organizers

essentially argue that the spontaneous can become conscious and long lasting. Grab the book and take up the debate.”

—Larry Cohen, board chair Our Revolution, past president, Communications Workers of America

“In this fascinating and insightful dialogue, the distinguished historian John Womack and a set of veteran labor activists probe the most fundamental of questions: How do we organize the 21 century working-class and give it the power to transform world capitalism? Are workers with vital skills and strategic leverage the key to a labor resurgence, or should organizers wager upon a mobilization of working people whose relationship to the economy’s commanding heights is more diffuse? Or can we arrive at some dialectical symbiosis? Whatever the answer, this is the kind of constructively radical conversation essential to the rebirth of working-class power in our time.”

—Nelson Lichtenstein, historian and author of *Capitalism Contested: The New Deal and Its Legacies*