

# Rolling Stone

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## The Fossil Fuel Resistance

As the world burns, a new movement to reverse climate change is emerging - fiercely, loudly and right next door

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It got so hot in Australia in January that **the weather service had to add two new colors to its charts**. A few weeks later, at the other end of the planet, new data from the CryoSat-2 satellite showed 80 percent of Arctic sea ice has disappeared. We're not breaking records anymore; we're breaking the planet. In 50 years, no one will care about the fiscal cliff or the Euro crisis. They'll just ask, "So the Arctic melted, and then what did you do?"

Here's the good news: We'll at least be able to say we fought.

After decades of scant organized response to climate change, a powerful movement is quickly emerging around the country and around the world, building on the work of scattered front-line organizers who've been fighting the fossil-fuel industry for decades. It has no great charismatic leader and no central organization; it battles on a thousand fronts. But taken together, it's now big enough to matter, and it's growing fast.

### The Fossil Fuel Resistance: Meet the New Green Heroes

Americans got to see some of this movement spread out across the Mall in Washington, D.C., on a bitter-cold day in February. Press accounts put the crowd upward of 40,000 – by far the largest climate rally in the country's history. They were there to oppose the Keystone XL pipeline, which would run down from Canada's tar sands, south to the Gulf of Mexico, a fight that *Time* magazine recently referred to as the Selma and the Stonewall of the environmental movement. But there were thousands in the crowd also working to block fracking wells across the Appalachians and proposed Pacific coast deep-water ports that would send coal to China. Students from most of the 323 campuses where the fight for fossil-fuel divestment is under way mingled with veterans of the battles to shut down mountaintop-removal coal mining in West Virginia and Kentucky, and with earnest members of the Citizens Climate Lobby there to demand that Congress enact a serious price on carbon. A few days earlier, 48 leaders had been arrested outside the White House – they included ranchers from Nebraska who didn't want a giant pipeline across their land and leaders from Texas refinery towns who didn't want more crude spilling into their communities. Legendary investor Jeremy Grantham was on hand, urging scientists to accompany their research with civil disobedience, as were solar entrepreneurs quickly figuring out how to deploy panels on rooftops across the country. The original Americans were well-represented; indigenous groups are core

leaders of the fight, since their communities have been devastated by mines and cheated by oil companies. The Rev. Lennox Yearwood Jr. of the Hip Hop Caucus was handcuffed next to Julian Bond, former head of the NAACP, who recounted stories of being arrested for integrating Atlanta lunch counters in the Sixties.

It's a sprawling, diverse and remarkably united movement, marked by its active opposition to the richest and most powerful industry on Earth. The Fossil Fuel Resistance has already won some serious victories, blocking dozens of new coal plants and closing down existing ones – ask the folks at Little Village Environmental Justice Organization who helped shutter a pair of coal plants in Chicago, or the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, which fought to stop Chevron from expanding its refinery in Richmond, California. "Up to this point, grassroots organizing has kept more industrial carbon out of the atmosphere than state or federal policy," says Gopal Dayaneni of the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project. It's an economic resistance movement, too, one that's well aware renewable energy creates three times as many jobs as coal and gas and oil. Good jobs that can't be outsourced because the sun and the wind are close to home. It creates a future, in other words.

These are serious people: You're not a member of the Resistance just because you drive a Prius. You don't need to go to jail, but you do need to do more than change your light bulbs. You need to try to change the system that is raising the temperature, the sea level, the extinction rate – even raising the question of how well civilization will survive this century.

Soon after the big D.C. rally, the state department issued a report downplaying Keystone XL's environmental impact, thus advancing the pipeline proposal another step. Since then, at the urging of the remarkable cellphone-company-cum-activist-group Credo, nearly 60,000 people have signed a pledge promising to resist, peacefully but firmly, if the pipeline is ever approved. By early March, even establishment commentators like Thomas Friedman had noticed – he used his *New York Times* column to ask activists to "go crazy" with civil disobedience; 48 hours later, 25 students and clergy were locked down inside a pipeline-company office outside Boston. It's not a one-sided fight anymore.

No movement this diverse is going to agree on a manifesto, but any reckoning begins with the idea that fossil fuel is dirty at every stage, and we need to put it behind us as fast as we can. For those of us in affluent countries, small shifts in lifestyle won't be enough; we'll also need to alter the policies that keep this industry fat and happy. For the poor world, the much harder goal is to leapfrog the fossil-fuel age and go straight to renewables – a task that those of us who prospered by filling the atmosphere with carbon must help with, for reasons both moral and practical. And for all of us, it means standing with communities from the coal fields of Appalachia to the oil-soaked Niger Delta as they fight for their homes. They've fought longest and hardest and too often by themselves. Now that global warming is starting to pour seawater into subways, the front lines are expanding and the reinforcements are finally beginning to arrive.

### **Climate Change and the End of Australia**

Right now, the fossil-fuel industry is mostly winning. In the past few years, they've proved "peak-oil" theorists wrong – as the price rose for hydrocarbons, companies found lots of new sources, though mostly by scraping the bottom of the barrel, spending even more money to get even-cruddier energy. They've learned to frack (in essence, explode a pipe bomb a few thousand feet beneath the surface, fracturing the surrounding rock). They've figured out how to take the sludgy tar sands and heat them with natural gas till the oil flows. They've managed to drill miles beneath

the ocean's surface. And the hyperbolic enthusiasm has gushed even higher than the oil. *The Wall Street Journal* has declared North Dakota a new Saudi Arabia. *The New York Times* described a new shale-oil find in California as more than four times as large as North Dakota's. "We could make OPEC 'NOPEC' if we really put our minds to it," said Charles Drevna of the American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers. "We're talking decades, if not into the hundreds of years, of supply in North America."

But all that fossil fuel will only get pumped and mined and burned if we decide to ignore the climate issue; were we to ever take it seriously, the math would quickly change. As I pointed out in these pages last summer, the world's fossil-fuel companies, even before these new finds, had five times more carbon in their reserves than we could burn if we hope to stay below a two-degree-Celsius rise in global temperatures. That's the red line almost every government in the world has agreed on, but the coal, oil and natural-gas companies, propelled by record profits, just keep looking for more – and ignore reality. A new report shows that an anonymous group of industry billionaires has secretly poured more than \$100 million into anti-environmental front groups. Weeks before Election Day, Chevron gave the largest corporate Super PAC contribution of the post-Citizens United era, making sure that Congress stayed in the hands of climate deniers.

But every flood erodes their position, and every heat wave fuels the Resistance. When the Keystone pipeline first became controversial, in 2011, a poll of D.C. "energy insiders" showed that more than 70 percent of them thought they'd have permits to build it by the end of the year. Big Oil, of course, may end up getting its way, but so far its money hasn't overwhelmed the passion, spirit and creativity its foes have brought to the battle. And we're not just playing defense anymore: The rapidly spreading divestment movement may be the single biggest face of the Resistance. It's no longer confined to campuses; city governments and religious denominations have begun to unload their stakes in oil companies, and the movement is even spreading to self-interested investors now that HSBC has calculated that taking climate change seriously could cut share prices of oil companies by up to 60 percent.

With each passing month, something else weakens the industry's hand: the steady rise of renewable energy, a technology that's gone from pie-in-the-sky to panel-on-the-roof in remarkably short order. In the few countries where governments have really gotten behind renewables, the results are staggering: There were days last spring when Germany (pale, northern Germany) managed to generate half its power from solar panels. Even in this country, much of the generating capacity added last year came from renewables. A December study from the University of Delaware showed that by 2030 we could affordably power the nation 99.9 percent of the time on renewable energy. In other words, logic, physics and technology work against the fossil-fuel industry. For the moment, it has the political power it needs – but political power shifts perhaps more easily than physics.

### Global Warming's Terrifying New Math

Which is where the resistance comes in. Forty-three years ago, the first anarchic Earth Day drew 20 million Americans into the streets. That surge helped push through all kinds of legislation – the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act – and spurred the growth of organizations like the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund. As these "green groups" became the face of the environmental movement, they grew adept at playing an inside-the-Beltway lobbying game. But that strategy got harder as the power of the right wing grew; for 25 years, they've been unable to win significant progress on climate change.

Now, energized by the Keystone protests, some strides have been made. The NRDC has done yeoman's work against the pipeline. The Sierra Club, which just a few years ago was taking millions from the fracking industry to shill for natural gas, has been reinvented. In January, the club dropped a 120-year ban on civil disobedience. The following month, its executive director, Michael Brune, was led away from the White House in handcuffs.

But the center of gravity has also shifted from big, established groups to local, distributed efforts. In the Internet age, you don't need direct mail and big headquarters; you need Twitter. In Texas and Oklahoma, hundreds have joined actions led by the Tar Sands Blockade, which has used daredevil tactics and lots of courage to get between the industry and the pipeline it needs to move oil overseas. In Montana, author Rick Bass and others sat-in to stop the export of millions of tons of coal from ports on the West Coast. And all across the Marcellus and Utica shale formations in the Northeast, people have been standing up for their communities, often by sitting down in front of the fracking industry. The Fossil Fuel Resistance looks more and more like Occupy – in fact, they've overlapped from the beginning, since oil companies are the one percent of the one percent. The movements share a political analysis, too: A grid with a million solar rooftops feels more like the Internet than ConEd; it's a farmers market in electrons, with the local control that it implies.

Like Occupy, this new Resistance is not obsessed with winning over Democratic Party leaders. The Keystone arrests in 2011 marked the most militant protests outside the White House during Obama's first term; now Van Jones, who once worked for the president, has taken to calling Keystone the "Obama pipeline." Used to dealing with the established green groups, the administration thinks in terms of deals – "We'll approve the pipeline but give you something else you want" – the kind of logic that gains the approval of op-ed columnists and talking heads. But given that the Arctic has already melted, we don't have room for easy compromises. The president's insistence that he favors an "all of the above" energy system, where oil and gas are as welcome as solar and wind, seems increasingly like a classic political hedge. In fact, if the GOP wasn't in the tank for the oil industry, you couldn't do much worse than Obama's campaign trail rhetoric. Last year, the president went to Oklahoma, posed in front of a stack of oil pipe and bragged of adding enough new pipelines to encircle Earth. Since the election, the president has started talking green, promising that now climate change would be a priority – but this growing Resistance is, I think, unconvinced. As climate leader Naomi Klein said, "This time, no honeymoon and no hero worship."

Only grit and hard work. We've watched great cultural shifts and organizing successes in recent years, like the marriage-equality and immigration-reform movements. But breaking the power of oil companies may be even harder because the sums of the money on the other side are so fantastic – there are trillions of dollars worth of oil in Canada's tar sands and the North Dakota shale. The men who own the coal mines and the gas wells will spend what they need to assure their victories. Last month, Rex Tillerson, Exxon's \$100,000-a-day CEO, said that environmentalists were "obtuse" for opposing new pipelines. He announced the company planned to more than double the acreage on which it was exploring for new hydrocarbons and said he expected that renewables would account for just one percent of our energy in 2040, essentially declaring that the war to save the climate was over before it started. He added, "My philosophy is to make money."

That same day, scientists announced that Earth was now warming 50 times faster than it ever has in human civilization, and that carbon-dioxide levels had set a perilous new record at Mauna Loa's measuring station. Right now, we're losing. But as the planet runs its spiking fever, the antibodies are starting to kick in. We know what the future holds unless we resist. And so resist we will.

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