

## Strategy and tactics in the environmental movement

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**Editor's Note:** *This article is considerably longer than our usual maximum, but we are publishing it in full because it raises issues of vital importance to the future of the environmental movement as a whole, and of its growing ecosocialist wing in particular. We hope it will promote a much-needed discussion on how to build the fight against climate change in particular, and against capitalist ecocide as a whole.*

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by Chris Williams

*Tactics:* the science and art of using a fighting force to the best advantage having regard to the immediate situation of combat.

*Strategy:* the science and art of conducting a military campaign in its large-scale and long-term aspects.

—*New Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary*

Naomi Klein, in a recent interview, [Green Group's May be More Damaging than Climate Change Deniers](#), has sparked a furious debate amongst activists on the right and left of the North American environmental movement. Thanks to Klein's article, the flames of controversy have been fanned and brought forth some fiery rhetoric around a dispute which has smoldered since the emergence of a more combative and distinctive left current within the environmental movement. A current associated with the concept of climate justice, and one that has further expanded since Occupy burst onto the political scene in the fall of 2011.

Prominent climate blogger Joseph Romm, in a quite rancorous piece, labeled Klein's views as "[filled with contrarian "media bait" statements devoid of substance](#)" and recommended no-one review or buy her upcoming book and film on climate change.

Klein responded that, as neither her book nor her film have been released yet, offering a critique of them was "[a new twist on old-school arrogance](#)" and that if anyone was "taking a sledge hammer to an ally" Romm should examine "what's in your (bloody) hand".

Regardless of the rhetoric, the opening up of space for broader and deeper political discussion is to be welcomed in a movement that to its detriment, has too often focused more on specific environmental battles and the activism needed to win them, than it has on an examination and discussion of the politics that underlie any particular course of action.

Given the environmental crisis, the need for urgency of action, and the conservatism of the mainstream of the movement, dominated by giant, top-down, well-funded NGO's, such as the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and others, not only has the question of strategy often been given short shrift, but, in the military meaning of the term, even a full discussion of the appropriate tactics has been neglected.

Beyond the individual protagonists, the broader debate essentially boils down to a single and vitally important question: what is the most effective terrain, and with which combination of troops and allies, should the environmental movement engage with opposing forces in order to emerge victorious?

One suspects that, given the response of some of the more market-oriented environmental organizations to drown out Klein's arguments, what they are objecting to the most isn't in fact, the claim that they are worse than climate deniers. Rather, that Klein's larger sin lies elsewhere, in bringing out into the open a discussion large Green NGO's would prefer to keep buried.

They fear antagonizing their funding sources and losing millions of dollars, should they become associated with more radical ideas, ones that center on discussing the nature of capitalism itself and the relationship between our economic and social system to the ecological and climate crisis. A fearful prospect which threatens not only specific tactics, but their entire *raison d'être*.

Invoking the word *justice*, as activists of color did when they formed organizations in the late 1970's and early '80's focused on environmental justice to tackle virulent and pervasive institutionalized environmental racism, this debate actually goes back, as Naomi Klein referenced, to controversies that first emerged with the rise to prominence of the modern US environmental movement in the late 1960's.

The movement effectively split; on one side, a predominantly white mainstream movement which dismissed or downplayed questions of race, class or gender and chiefly focused on wilderness issues, preservation and conservation. On the other, a more localized, more often than not African-American-led environmental justice movement focused on the human environment affected by environmental racism, poverty and inequality in urban and rural settings. Rather than being able to work in partnership with the power structure, the concept of justice implies a power *relationship* and opposing sides with distinct interests.

To quote [Van Jones](#), in a *Washington Post* article earlier this year, "We essentially have a racially segregated environmental movement... We're too polite to say that. Instead, we say we have an environmental justice movement and a mainstream movement." Without being specific about which groups were being criticized, the NAACP's [report](#) on the disproportionate racial and class impacts of coal plants in the United States noted that:

"This problem [of separation between grassroots environmental justice organizations and large Green NGO's] reflects a shortcoming of many mainstream environmental advocates: while denouncing the fact that the climate change will disproportionately impact poor people and people of color in the Global South, many climate advocates have often failed to highlight the ongoing, disproportionate impact of carbon-intensive industries on poor people and people of color in the United States. Campaign energy tends to be focused on coal plants that are geographically proximate to (mostly white, middle-class) climate campaigners — such as coal plants on college campuses — rather than targeting those coal-fired power plants that most heavily impact poor people and people of color."

When Jacqui Patterson, Director of Climate Justice for the NAACP, was asked to comment in an interview for Yale's environmental site, e360, on the dearth of leadership and representation from people of color in major environmental organizations [she responded](#), "There's been a historic failure to articulate the impacts of these issues on communities of color and low-income communities in the United States."

While environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace are seeking [to change](#) and become more cognizant of the disproportionate racial impacts of pollution in the North, as well as become more representative, inclusive, and [involved](#), as long as there is a focus on a corporate strategy of lobbying, fund-raising and high-profile publicity stunts which lack a strong element of social justice, member democracy or community involvement, change will be incremental and painfully slow.

To raise these difficulties and different political outlooks within the environmental movement is not to be 'divisive', or 'weaken' the movement, as is so often the charge from those trying to foreclose on political discussion, rather it is absolutely essential if we are to move forward in these desperate times.

As such, there is a level of importance to the debate that should encourage everyone concerned with the future of our planet to consider, analyze and discuss, because it relates directly to the future of the movement. And as building a successful, mass, independent movement and democratic, militant organization for social and ecological justice is the only thing that will prevent runaway climate change and mass extinctions that call into question the future of human civilization, it is critical that activists engage with the blossoming, much needed and very healthy debate on strategy and tactics.

The debate has erupted across environmental blogs and websites once more because, just as the environmental justice movement originally emerged from activists and communities of color 30 years ago, a more radical wing of the movement is growing, becoming more assertive, asking new questions and seeking to overcome previous political weaknesses and omissions. Questions which are not just about how to marshal our forces to win individual battles, but broader questions that are about how to string those victories together into a campaign that has an identifiable objective and grand vision.

Strategically speaking, over the large scale and longer term, what kind of society are we fighting for? Are we seeking merely to sand off some of the ever-expanding, rougher edges of capitalism, keep the system somewhat contained and at least a few small areas sacrosanct from the profit motive?

Or are we fighting for a completely different kind of world? One free of commodities, fast food, agribusiness, carbon markets, warfare over key resources, poverty, racism, sexism and a truly objective science and technology that is no longer twisted and disfigured by the priorities of financial accumulation.

How can we both fight for meaningful change right now (tactics) that simultaneously helps build the movement and brings us closer to our larger, more long-term goals (strategy)? How do we differentiate between effective tactics that supplement our overall strategy, versus those that lead us up blind alleys?

Depending on how one answers these political questions, determines how and with whom one organizes. In reality, this is very old debate and surfaces whenever a social movement reaches an impasse. The question of strategy and tactics grows out of the concrete situation which confronts new activists drawn into the struggle.

Very often, it results in the emergence of new organizations which are more responsive to the increased demands and broader world views of those newly radicalized participants, such as we are beginning to see with the formation of national groups [350.org](#), [Rising Tide](#), the leftwing coalition [System Change not Climate Change](#) and, most importantly, the newly emerging indigenous organization, [Idle No More](#).

Such was the case in the Civil Rights movement, as newer, young activists became disillusioned with the go-slow and legalistic route pursued by venerable civil rights organizations such as the NAACP (despite its radical roots), desirous of swifter and more thorough-going change. They agitated and formed organizations that were independent, and open to new tactics with larger goals.

Instead of an emphasis on experts, lobbying, moral suasion and lawsuits in the courts, tactics were redirected toward mobilizing the Black population as a whole; through mass non-violent direct action, set within a strategy of escalating activism and involvement from wider and wider layers of society. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed in 1957 by Martin Luther King Jr. after the success of the Montgomery bus boycott. Three years later, after the success of the sit-in movement, students formed SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Having won political rights in 1964 and 1965, the movement radicalized further as King switched his focus toward economic rights and another new organization formed in 1966: The Black Panther Party.

In the contemporary environmental movement, there are large, well-funded NGO's that consider partnership with the corporations and a strategy based on lobbying politicians and court battles as the most effective way to moderate the behavior of corporations and place limits on their polluting and anti-environmental activities.

As Klein commented, in an age of neoliberalism, the process has gone even further, with large, nominally Green, environmental NGO's (ENGO's) operating under the paradigm of, "It's not, 'sue the bastards;' it's, 'work through corporate partnerships with the bastards.'"

Conversely, organizations such as EDF, while no doubt eschewing a description of their corporate partners as illegitimate offspring, cite in their defense the many lawsuits that have been won, the changed corporate behavior and the adoption of codes of corporate sustainability as evidence that their approach works.

In responding to Klein, Senior VP of Strategy and Communications for EDF, Eric Pooley, prefers that when "faced with the choice of making real progress in our fight against climate change or waging ideological warfare, we will always choose the former" – as if it is self-evident that the two things are mutually exclusive. He noted how [EDF-backed policies](#),

"In 1991, [we helped McDonald's](#) phase out foam "clamshell" sandwich containers. In 2004, [EDF and FedEx launched](#) the first "street-ready" hybrid trucks ever built. Today, hybrids are in hundreds of corporate fleets, from UPS to Coca-Cola to the U.S. Postal Service. And since 2008, [EDF's Climate Corps](#) program has placed hundreds of MBAs at some of the biggest corporations in the world to both increase energy efficiency today and train them as business leaders of tomorrow. To date, our Climate Corps fellows have identified \$1.2 billion in potential energy savings, with greenhouse gas reductions equivalent to taking 200,000 cars off the road."

In other words, compromise and working with forces as they exist is the way to make measureable progress toward goals that all environmentalists can agree on.

Against this, one could surely argue that making Coca Cola, McDonalds, FedEx and UPS more efficient at making money, while giving them a patina of green street-cred for their modified business practices, misses the point. In a rational society that measured itself against its ability to care for all of its citizens, which by extension would include the living and non-living world upon which it was based, none of those organizations would exist in the first place; they produce products and services of no genuine use to society and, in the case of Coke and McDonalds, are actively detrimental to human and animal health.

But EDF, along with the NRDC and the Nature Conservancy, are some of the most conservative of all environmental organizations. Though they wield enormous influence by virtue of the millions of dollars they can deploy for a given campaign, and the positive coverage they obtain from the corporate media, many grassroots environmentalists are aware that their highly conservative political outlook is shaped by their financial and political connections. Therefore, they make an easy target for dismissing the efficacy of their supposed solutions.

After all, NRDC, Nature Conservancy and EDF not only advocate natural gas as a "bridge fuel" and "responsible" fracking to get it, they are all part of [USCAP](#), the United States Climate Action Partnership. This is a group which includes such environmental stalwarts as Shell, Rio Tinto, Dow, Exelon and PepsiCo amongst its collection of giant energy, pharmaceutical and automobile multinationals. If that doesn't qualify as [Greenwashing](#), I don't know what does.

Furthermore, as Klein has [previously pointed out](#), many of the largest Green NGO's not only have tens and in some cases, hundreds of millions of dollars, invested in the corporate casino otherwise known as the stock market, many don't even screen for weapons manufacturers or fossil fuel stocks, in the midst of a burgeoning student-led divestment campaign.

While the Sierra Club has since repudiated donations from Clorox and the [\\$26 million dollars](#) it received from one sector of the fossil fuel industry, Cheasapeake Energy Corp, which fracks for natural gas, in order to see off one of its competitors, the coal industry, the Club's leaders had no problem swapping donors by accepting [double that amount](#) from multi-billionaire stop-and-frisk advocate Mike Bloomberg – the mayor who boasts of turning New York City into a value-added commodity and “[high end product](#).”

Though of course, the prize for greenwashing par excellence, must surely go either to the Pentagon, for their highly imaginative concept of sailing “[the Great Green Fleet](#)” or, in a tight race for first spot, the Environmental Protection Agency, which awarded a Climate Leadership Award this year to [Raytheon](#), a company which specializes in being “[the world's premier missile maker](#), providing defensive and offensive weapons for air, land, sea and space.”

However, prominent activists such as Romm, who publishes a lot of excellent information and analysis on his blog, deploy another common argument. Rather than partnering with major corporations to change corporate behavior, many environmentalists cite the inability of passing anything remotely radical in Congress as reason to trim their demands to what might feasibly garner enough votes to pass in a conservative and dysfunctional Congress awash with corporate cash.

Indeed, the first four reasons Romm gives for supporting cap-and-trade legislation in Congress all revolve around accepting the severe limitations of what's deemed possible by Congress, business and the general public. This is of course standard fare for apologists of Barack Obama and the Democratic Party and their complete inability to deliver any substantive progressive change.

It is a line of argument premised, not only on the demonstrably false basis that the Democratic Party would do those things if it could, but more generally, on the notion that these are static *things* and simple facts of life we have to accept, rather than the malleable thoughts of people, subject to change based on the balance of social forces and the impact of activism.

Responding to this line of argumentation based on “the politics of the possible”, not letting “the perfect be the enemy of the good” and other such banalities, one could reasonably reply that limiting our horizons for change to what members of Congress will find acceptable, when a significant percentage don't believe in science, let alone climate change, is a recipe for stagnation and deep disappointment.

Moreover, as the re-election rate of incumbents to the United States Congress has only dipped below 90% [twice since 1964](#), and is often [above 95%](#) due to systematic gerrymandering by both major parties and the money, power and influence that comes with an incumbent's position, focusing on Congress seems a highly unpropitious avenue for activist attention. Unless a Member of Congress is so blatantly incompetent or so brazenly corrupt they manage the difficult task of standing out from their peers, it is essentially a job for life.

Subsequent to the 2010 Citizens United decision, deeming that corporations are people, and therefore legally able to anonymously contribute unlimited campaign cash, it would seem likely that re-election rates in the United States will approach levels that would make even old Soviet bureaucrats blush. In scouting one possible location for combat, it would appear decidedly improbable that a focus on lobbying Congress, in the absence of a movement trying to occupy Congress, will result in victory.

And with the Supreme Court [invalidating key sections](#) of the Voting Rights Act; and the criminal justice system making it systematically impossible to account for the existence of institutionalized racism, despite its glaringly obvious and pervasive impact, extensively documented in Michelle Alexander's excellent [The New Jim Crow](#) and the easily-absorbed legal and financial obligations imposed on BP in the wake of *Deepwater Horizon*, it should be clear that the courts are unlikely to be our most fertile terrain for waging a pitched battle with the forces of the corporatocracy.

To be clear, this is not to say activists should completely ignore Congress or legal skirmishes, but they can only play a secondary role to larger, more decisive battles fought elsewhere, with more resolute allies, on more favorable political topography. Campaigns that focus on mobilizing the population *en masse*, which help prepare the path for successful changes to the law through Congress and the courts, as our forces change people's perceptions of what's possible and march closer to the citadels of power.

Klein was also taken to task by Romm and others for failing to appreciate the benefits of market-driven solutions to climate change, such as cap and trade schemes and carbon offsetting schemes administered through the UN's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This despite the well-documented abuses and comprehensive resistance from indigenous groups to the UN's REDD scheme of forest offsets (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation).

However, this is the basis for Klein's claim that green NGO's are worse than climate deniers – because they fail to grasp the revolutionary corollary of the science behind climate change in the way that corporate climate change deniers clearly have.

Namely, that capitalism is incapable of effectively addressing the crisis because it cuts against the most revered of capitalist directives: to make money at all costs. And that therefore, the attempts of politicians in thrall to capitalist entities, busily devising market-based solutions such as cap and trade, will never work because they are trying to jam a very dollar-shaped peg into a distinctly earth-shaped hole.

While Romm [cites evidence](#) to substantiate his rather desperate claims that the largest carbon trading system, the European Union's Emissions Trading System (ETS), is working just as intended, many others disagree.

According to the rabidly free market magazine *The Economist*, the EU's ETS, which has "[long been a mess](#)", and is now "holed below the waterline" as the price for carbon credits has plunged to junk bond status, due to a huge oversupply of allowances (close to two billion tonnes, or a year's supply of emissions).

Even the [European Commission](#) itself admits that, "In the short term this surplus risks undermining the orderly functioning of the carbon market; in the longer term it could affect the ability of the EU ETS to meet more demanding emission reduction targets cost-effectively." *Time* magazine recently [posed the question](#), "If Carbon Markets Can't Work in Europe, Can They Work Anywhere?"

In fact, as reported by Roger Pielke Jr., Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Colorado, the US has achieved the [same reductions in carbon emissions](#) as the EU with no cap and trade program, or indeed any discernible climate policy of any kind. As he concludes,

*"With the US and the EU averaging ~2% [carbon emissions reduction] per year since 1990, it is ironic indeed to see otherwise committed environmentalists acting as apologists for the EU ETS. The uncomfortable reality is that no policies have been put in place anywhere in the world that have indicated an ability to accelerate rates of decarbonisation to levels approaching [the necessary minimum of] 5% per year. That includes the EU ETS. If greater progress is to be made, debate will have to move beyond carbon pricing and the relative success or shortfalls of the EU ETS."*

Unfortunately, even as European politicians scramble to cobble together yet another reform of the ETS to salvage the "green" flagship of EU environmental policy from ignominious collapse, many other countries around the world, driven by the same nostrums of neoliberal orthodoxy, are seeking to emulate the exact same system. A system ripe for corporate abuse, fraud and all manner of financial scams, without doing anything about carbon emissions. This is the denialism that Klein is talking about, as well as the danger represented by having people believe that something is being accomplished when the exact opposite is the case.

For more on how major financial institutions play the carbon credits system, the *New York Times* recently looked into the latest “[hot new game on Wall Street](#).” The big US banks have reportedly been stockpiling ethanol credits from biofuel production in order to artificially drive up the price and reap windfall profits, at the expense of motorists forced to buy gasoline mixed with ethanol from corn fermentation.

No genuine environmental organization can back carbon trading or other market-based schemes. Dozens of social justice and environmental and indigenous organizations have unequivocally called for the [scrapping of ETS](#) before it does more damage and further locks in the very fossil-fueled energy production system we’re trying so urgently to dismantle.

However, Klein, due to her being a board member of Bill Mckibben’s organization, 350.org, has also come under attack from more leftwing activists committed to a much broader vision for the dramatic degree of change required if we are to prevent such a future. They lump 350 in with the larger, older organizations for several reasons.

First, the funding of the group is now [substantial](#) and derives from similarly non-transparent, undemocratic, conservative and moneyed sources as the more established ENGO’s. For these critics, the amount and source of funding explains 350’s choice of, in their view, weak and inconsequential targets for attack – with 350’s sole focus on stopping the northern section of a single pipeline, Keystone XL, and divestment from fossil fuels. In this view, even the arrests of over 1000 protesters at the Whitehouse in November 2011 was [part of a cynical campaign](#) choreographed by sinister corporate and pro-Democratic Party forces to manipulate climate activists:

*“The ‘idealists’ here were the rank-and-file day-to-day worker-bees writing press releases and doing social media work for 350.org and Friends who became True Believers in the mission, as well as the 1,000+ arrestees, many of whom ironically probably flew to Washington, DC to get arrested on planes fueled by tar sands crude.”*

Activist John Stauber [stated that](#) “Martin Luther King must be turning in his grave” because “The much-hyped victory for civil disobedience at the White House claimed by 350.org [in] November [of 2011] is a mirage. Rather than civil disobedience, it looks now like civil obedience, pursuing the goal that President Obama smell like an Earth Day rose for his heroic stand against the XL Pipeline.”

As for 350’s divestment campaign, Canadian journalist and activist [Cory Morningstar](#) writes in her article, *Mckibben’s Divestment Tour: Brought to you by Wall St*, it’s not just their dodgy sources of funding that are highly problematic, but the entire political thrust of 350.org, which is designed to pacify the masses. Divestment makes student activists feel that they’re doing something to address the climate crisis, when in reality they provide the most effective political cover for the corporations to continue their planet-wrecking activities and allow capitalism to float by unnoticed as the root cause of the entire problem:

*“350.org and friends serve a vital purpose. These organizations successfully make certain that the public feel good about themselves. Simultaneously, they ensure obedience and passiveness to the state in order to secure current system/power structures and keep them intact.”*

Coming from a somewhat different political direction, author most recently of *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Chaos*, Christian Parenti [singles out](#) three important flaws in a campaign focused on divestment:

*“Though elegant in its simplicity — attacking Big Carbon directly — this symbolically charged strategy (or rather tactic) suffers three crucial weaknesses. First, it misrecognizes the basic economics of the fossil fuel industry and thus probably won’t hurt it. Second, it misrecognizes the nature and function of the stock market. Third, it ignores the potentially very important role of government in addressing the climate crisis.”*

In an article that largely agrees with Klein, anti-tar sands activist Macdonald Stainsby, writing in *CounterPunch*, [argues](#) that “Suffice to say, [350.org] are now very well-funded, by the very same people who fund not just Big Green, but the very people in North America it is most deadly to hand direction of social justice struggles to: The US Democratic Party, especially the Hopey Changey variety of brand Obama.”

With regard to the September 2013 Draw the Line protests, Stainsby goes on to point out:

*“McKibben and his pro-administration 350.org organizing is already back at it. There is now yet another anti-Keystone XL “day of action” people are asked to participate in for September 21, 2013. It will be in several larger venues across the US, appealing to and not in defiance of the Obama administration— targeting in particular John Kerry, as he is Secretary of State and apparently has been given the reins for the KXL decision. Meanwhile, John Kerry is trying to get a Saudi-backed war going in Syria. Since war is the greatest environmental catastrophe possible, and ramps up oil use massively (in particular bitumen and other “really heavy” types of crude make jet fuel better than they create gasoline for your car), while further deepening imperial designs in the primary oil producing region of the world.”*

Leaving aside the highly problematic language describing people prepared to get arrested for their beliefs as mindless drones in the service of the Democratic Party, who are, in addition, morally suspect because some of them may have traveled by plane in a large country with limited rail infrastructure, these arguments all exhibit the same fatal flaw when it comes to building movements.

In the abstract, all of the left criticisms of 350, Bill McKibben, the campaign against KXL and for divestment are formally correct. Bill McKibben continues to vacillate as to whether Barack Obama and the Democratic Party can be part of the climate solution, despite Obama’s boast about his administration building enough pipeline to circle the earth “and then some.”

It is surely past time for the idea that the Democratic Party, regardless of the charisma, rhetoric, race or gender of its leaders, can possibly be an effective receptacle for people’s hopes and dreams for meaningful environmental, or any other kind of progressive change.

Obama has had six years to show us otherwise and yet has merely [blown hot air](#) of no real consequence in the vague direction of his environmental supporters while in practice girding up for continual expansion of US fossil fuel production. Indeed, the US achieved another fossil fuel [production “milestone”](#) in August, when it hit its highest levels since 1989, due to the high price of oil and increases in the extent of hydraulic fracturing for oil and gas. Despite this, production is set to increase by a further 1 million barrels in 2014.

In the longer term, all reports indicate that, as we enter the “Third Carbon Age,” global production of fossil fuels will be [far larger in 2040](#) than it is today thanks to the rise of “unconventional sources”. Technological innovations and billions of dollars in investment, along with high oil prices (and hence profits) justifying that investment, have made possible the extraction of oil and gas from previously out of reach sources: by fracking, deep water off-shore drilling, tapping frozen underwater sources of methane and the climate-related loss of Arctic sea ice.

In combination, these have opened up several new frontiers in oil and gas extraction. Obama, in the May 2013 Whitehouse document *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*, noted that it is essential that the U.S. ensure “[how to make the most of the emerging economic opportunities in the region](#)”, by ramping up military capability and economic investments in Alaska.

The southern portion of KXL, traveling through Texas and Oklahoma, which gives Canadian tar sands oil the strategically important outlet to Gulf Coast refineries and transportation it needs, has already been greenlighted by the Obama Administration. The northern portion and focus of anti-pipeline activism from 350 and other ENGO's merely addresses a bottle-neck at Cushing. If the State Department and Obama give the go-ahead to build, it will further increase the flow of tar sands oil but is [not required](#) for the southern portion to become operational. What has prevented the southern portion from being nearer to completion has been the forthright and determined resistance of tar sands blockaders and local groups and individuals standing in the way of construction equipment.

Despite acknowledging the dire impact of this section of KXL in a recent report compiled by the Sierra Club, 350 and Friends of the Earth, [FAIL: How the Keystone XL Tar Sands Pipeline Flunks the Climate Test](#), the conclusion is itself a fail, as it omits to mention any of this, or calls on President Obama to issue a statement against its southern section completion.

And TransCanada and the Canadian government are already busily making contingency plans in the event that the Obama Administration does, against expectations, veto the project. Oil pipelines that go west, east and north from the tar sands in Alberta are [already being planned](#). If all else fails, a further huge increase in rail traffic is being prepared, the negative results of which we have already seen in human terms with the dozens of deaths in the town of Lac-Mégantic as a direct result of the mad [scramble for profits](#) and corporate deregulation. In 2009 there were [500 train cars](#) carrying tar sands oil out of Canada; a mere four years later, the projection for 2013 is 140,000.

Some leftwing commentators and activists seem to want to use these developments not as useful pieces of information signifying the relentless compulsion to accumulate profit, but rather as a bludgeon with which to attack other activists for their naivety. As if people don't understand that of course capitalists will seek other avenues to get their way. With so much money at stake, it's completely unrealistic to expect them to act any other manner. The point is that the movement has already forced them to do so by continually forcing a delay in their plans.

In terms of the impact of the divestment campaign, Bill McKibben has repeatedly stated that it is unlikely to significantly damage profits of some of the largest and most profitable corporations on the planet.

Even where we to limit our goals to solely transforming energy production away from fossil fuels and toward renewable sources – on its own a goal which will require a massive, highly organized and resolute social movement, it will not be enough. A report in the science journal *Nature Climate Change* demonstrates that renewable energy technologies don't primarily replace more polluting fossil-fuel sources, rather they add to them. Author Richard York's research indicates that a [supplementary strategy](#) that is more overtly political will be needed:

*“Of course all societies need energy. So, obviously, if societies are to stop using fossil fuels they must have other energy sources. However, the results from the analyses presented here indicate that the shift away from fossil fuel does not happen inevitably with the expansion of non-fossil-fuel sources, or at least in the political and economic contexts that have been dominant over the past fifty years around the world....”*

*“The most effective strategy for curbing carbon emissions is likely to be one that aims to not only develop non-fossil energy sources, but also to find ways to alter political and economic contexts so that fossil-fuel energy is more easily displaced and to curtail the growth in energy consumption as much as possible.”*

In other words, as I and other leftwing activists have consistently argued, the question is primarily about social and political change rather than technological advances or technocratic solutions.

On the surface, this could leave one terminally depressed. All of the national environmental organizations are compromised, our activism to date is inadequate, the dynamics of capitalism are a death train hurtling ever faster toward climate catastrophe, and merely switching energy sources, itself a huge task, will not be in any way sufficient.

Which returns us to the need to build robust and independent social movements and the original question I posed: how does one navigate these murky waters and chart a course between the barren shores of purist isolationism on one side and crass, unprincipled opportunism on the other? To craft and implement a set of effective, flexible and fluid tactics that complement and reinforce one another, drawing in wider layers, to fight for a much grander strategic goal than merely shutting down a single pipeline or even the much bigger task of transforming the energy production system?

As I mentioned earlier, what the leftwing critics ignore are the internal dynamics of social movements and how participation alters the ideas of those involved. A key tenet of Marxism – not to mention basic pedagogy – is that those involved in struggle “learn by doing” much more quickly and on a much deeper, more visceral level, than they ever could by reading leftwing critiques, however correct they may be in the abstract.

Everything in politics is contextual. Viewed in the abstract, left-wing critics of the focus on KXL and divestment are absolutely correct; neither is up to the task of preventing catastrophic climate change, nor denting the gigantic profits of the oil giants.

But the first point to make is that the movement is already considerably more sophisticated in its overall political understanding than a few short years ago. Previously, much of the emphasis for activism was on what an individual could do to effect change. The consumer was king and green products or reducing consumption by biking to work or recycling were the dominant discourse. With the new focus on production rather than consumption, we have taken a major step forward in the struggle. As recognized by Marx, it is production (for profit) which is the driving force of capitalism.

While McKibben remains confused and contradictory on a number of fronts, in his recent [interview in Salon](#) he said, “But this is a systemic problem. It’s going to be solved or not solved by a systemic solution. It’s past the point where we’re going to manage to do it one light bulb at a time. The roof of my house is covered in solar panels. When I’m home, I’m a pretty green fellow. But I know that that’s not actually going to solve the problem. So a lot of people have to get on the train and go to Washington to be in protests.”

Secondly, the emphasis on building a mass movement based on protest and civil disobedience, rather than narrower campaigns based on lobbying or “clicktivism”, represents another significant political step forward. And for all the drawbacks of McKibben, the detrimental vacillations on Obama and dubious funding sources, he has nevertheless been instrumental in moving tens of thousands of young people into struggle. And the struggle across the country is growing, [continuing to heat up](#) and generating new issues and questions about how to move forward. Building these actions has to be the focus of our energies as more minds will change in the process.

Personally, I have yet to meet an activist involved in the KXL or divestment campaigns who believe those things are the only thing to focus on, or that they will come close to solving the problem. In New York those involved in the anti-KXL 350 protests are also fighting to stop the Spectra fracked gas pipeline into lower Manhattan, along with fights to close Indian Point nuclear plant and to ban fracking in New York State.

And contrary to the idea that all of the students are mechanical “worker-bees”, there are ongoing and increasingly sharp debates between 350 activists and student groups about the top-down organizational structure of 350 in deciding on campaigns, as well as its political direction and choice of allies.

I have met many students who are rapidly and continuously reevaluating their political ideas as a direct result of being involved and running up against the [intransigence of university authorities](#) concerned with endowment profitability rather than future student livelihoods; the relentless and illogical pursuit of profit at all costs by capitalists at the expense of a livable planet; the abysmal disappointment that is the Obama Administration. As well as the limitations of an environmental strategy that still cleaves far too closely to the Democratic Party and corporate funders, rather than reaching out more forcefully to genuine allies amongst communities of color, trade unions and indigenous rights groups.

An activist who initially became involved through Friends of the Earth in DC recounts her journey toward more radical ideas and action. Kim Huhn, now active with Tar Sands Blockade in East Texas, [recollected by 2011](#),

*“she shared the growing disenchantment with the Obama administration’s environmental agenda and experienced firsthand how mass civil disobedience—the largest in 30 years—brought the tar sands and Keystone to national attention. She “watched the entire center of gravity in D.C. shift”—from inside-beltway lobbying to grassroots, community-based organizing. Then President Obama reversed his position and approved Keystone’s southern segment. Despite the professed outrage of more mainstream environmental leaders, in her view, no one was actually doing anything to stop its construction.”*

In conclusion, we know that capitalist forces will try to co-opt and infiltrate our movement and organizations to direct it into safe channels; that is, after all, their job. The recently commemorated 1963 March on Washington is a perfect example of how the state and more conservative civil rights groups tried to soften the rhetoric of the March, [change its aims](#) and [sideline key leftwing leaders](#) such as socialist and openly gay march organizer Bayard Rustin.

The question of organization and democracy is of tantamount importance as it is the base from which to decide on actions and debate political strategy. Transparent and democratic decision making is what helped previous movements being hijacked by hostile forces, derailed by conservatives or repressed by state violence.

At this point, it is unclear whether a group like 350 will be able to evolve into the fighting organization that is required, or whether students will have to form their own, more grassroots organization that is financially independent, democratic and more forcefully directed against capital.

350 has brought together newly radicalizing students behind a leader whose organization teams up with big funders and can’t seem to decide whether to bind arms with those to his right in positions of state power, or those to his left in the environmental justice movement. The question will be settled by the thousands of students in the 350-plus divestment movements on campuses across the country and other grassroots activists as they seek to pull many more people in and face the challenge of bringing real change to the United States.

The only national groups so far are the well-financed Environmental NGO's, though System Change not Climate Change is attempting to grow into the kind of national coalition that we lack. Canadian organizer Dru Oja Jay in a critique of the lack of democratic organization in Canada, where activists are drawn into undemocratic and often compromised ENGO's such as Greenpeace comments:

*“Movements often have an organization that embodies their spirit. The US civil rights movement in the 1960s was driven forward by the Southern Christian Leadership Congress [sic] and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The anti-nuclear direct action in the 1970s had the Movement for a New Society (MNS), and the “antiglobalization” movement of the 1990s and 2000s was an interwoven web of spokescouncil meetings and coalitions. Quebec’s epic student strikes in 2005 and 2012 were initiated by the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSÉ).*

*“These and many other movement organizations made historic decisions democratically. They chose their leaders, or chose to have spokespersons instead. They debated, analyzed and decided on strategies and actions. It may not have been perfectly equal, but everyone agreed on the intention.”*

As an adjunct to organizing, learning our history is important. Students should read up on the formation of SNCC. A good place to start would be Howard Zinn's, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* as he gives a first-hand account of the growth and issues within a movement fighting for racial and social justice:

*“These young rebels call themselves the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, but they are more a movement than an organization, for no bureaucratized structure can contain their spirit, no printed program capture the fierce and elusive quality of their thinking. And while they have no famous leaders, no inner access to the seats of national authority, they are clearly the front line of the Negro assault on the moral comfort of white America...All Americans owe them a debt for – if nothing else – releasing the idealism locked so long inside a nation that has not recently tasted the drama of social upheaval...Theirs was the silent generation until they spoke, the complacent generation until they marched and sang, the money-seeking generation until they renounced comfort and security to fight for justice in the dank and dangerous hamlets of the Black Belt.”*

We know the crucial point is that people are moving into action, and that this represents the key which will unlock the conundrum of how to build a movement “as radical as reality itself”. The shape and future direction of this movement is an open question. Will it radicalize further, broaden and deepen the scope of its demands, reject the Democratic Party, adopt its tactics to changing conditions but keep its eyes on the prize of a world without capitalism? Or will it get subsumed beneath the filth of capitalist bribery, state interference and repression and ugly compromises on principles?

The active and consistent involvement of already convinced socialists and radicals will help play a role in which direction things develop and as new organizations pop up and wider numbers join the struggle. Therefore, the most important thing is to dive into the resistance as and where it currently exists and consistently engage with the fight for the immediate goals of shutting down KXL and forcing universities and pension funds to divest, while holding no illusions that these are the be all and end all of a successful struggle.

A win on KXL, where Obama is forced to veto it, will be extremely significant. As will a rolling campaign of divestment chalking up college after college. This is for two interconnected reasons. First, victories breed the desire and belief in the possibility of more victories. The ruling class understands this perfectly well, which is why, when they are forced to back down, they try to massage the truth to downplay their loss. A victory for our side necessarily implies a loss for theirs. It was, after all, multi-billionaire investor Warren Buffett [who reminded us](#) “There’s class warfare, all right...but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”

KXL may have acquired a symbolic importance for our side, but so has it for theirs. Furthermore, KXL is strategically important not as a single pipeline but because it represents an attack on the frontal edge of fossil fuel development for the future, both in terms of rejecting extreme energy from unconventional sources and putting a stop to the building of infrastructure likely to be around for another 50 years once built.

Second, the manner of a victory and the methods used are equally important. A court victory achieved by NGO lawyers working in a social vacuum is completely different to a court victory achieved on the backs of mass mobilization, as illustrated by the civil rights movement.

Any victory on KXL will rightly be seen by activists on the ground as a triumph for the tactics of mass protest, not for persuading Obama to do the right thing. The case is similar with divestment. One can lament the fact that divestment is likely to be of little practical significance to the bottom-lines of the likes of Exxon and Chevron, or recognize that the focal point of attack are the very corporations responsible for the largest accumulation of capital in human history.

Inevitably, new questions will be raised: why aren't universities responsive to their students? Why aren't universities able to live up to their own discourse of sustainability and concern for young people's futures? How can we make links and forge alliances with disenfranchised and ignored communities around us? What about organized labor? What would it take to reign in the power of the fossil fuel corporations and how are they different to all other corporations? Are corporations and hence capitalism compatible with a functioning biosphere?

We should be part of all the discussions now going on in the movement about tactics and strategy, suggest alternatives, make the case for actions that will draw in more participants, and create links with frontline communities of color and indigenous rights, while working with the bigger organizations where we are able. Where we have criticisms, we should voice them; in my experience they will likely find a strong echo.

The ever more desperate ecological and economic situation is in itself driving people toward the need for more radical, systemic change. Particularly as it's increasingly obvious, to even the casual observer, that capitalism has no answers other than to further expand production in the interests of profit. As Marx remarked long ago, capitalism creates its own gravedigger. While he was talking about the 99%, the planet itself is now rebelling against further exploitation at the hands of the 1%.

In giving talks around the country, a few years ago it was necessary to spend quite a chunk of time putting forward the case that this was a systemic and political problem directly related to capitalism. Now, this is an almost common sense position. The bulk of any discussion now revolves around: what can we do about it and what kind of society do we want to build in its place?

As was recently reported about the political [sea-change occurring amongst young people](#):

*“Most striking of all, Millennials are more willing than their elders to challenge cherished American myths about capitalism and class. According to a 2011 Pew study, Americans under 30 are the only segment of the population to describe themselves as “have nots” rather than “haves.” They are far more likely than older Americans to say that business enjoys more control over their lives than government. And unlike older Americans, who favor capitalism over socialism by roughly 25 points, Millennials, narrowly, favor socialism.”*

As upsetting and urgent as the global physical situation is, the political situation is evolving in our favor. Our challenge is to build on the revolts of 2011, take inspiration from the uprisings in Turkey, Greece and Brazil, and implement tactics and strategy that take us forward to a revolutionary reconstitution of social power in the interests of social and ecological justice.