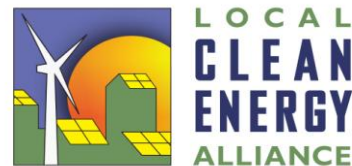


Expressions of Energy Democracy



Perspectives on an Emerging Movement

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By Al Weinrub, Coordinator, Local Clean Energy Alliance

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Introduction

In response to the increasingly serious impacts of climate change, people around the world are attempting to wrest control of energy resources from the powerful institutions that appear hell-bent on driving humanity to the brink of extinction.

The growing popular movement to address the world's climate and economic crisis is widespread, and takes many forms. Yet all reflect an effort by concerned citizens to exercise more control over energy decisions and to self-determine a sustainable, life-supporting energy future.

This movement, in effect, to democratize energy has become more self-conscious over the last few years. Energy democracy has become a theme that is increasingly expressed in energy and climate-related initiatives around the world, from the global South, to Western Europe, and even to North America.

In this short paper I try to capture the more conscious motion toward energy democracy as it is manifested in the United States. While energy democracy is reflected in the movement to confront and stop increasingly extreme fossil-fuel extraction, shipment, and consumption, its strongest expression is in advocating for an alternative to the centralized renewable energy model of the corporate energy establishment.

The paper looks at a few of the explicit expressions of energy democracy, some of the related programmatic approaches, and some of the leading proponents of democratizing energy in the U.S.

It is not meant to be a comprehensive or all-inclusive treatment of the subject. It is offered, rather, to initiate a discussion that could lead to closer collaboration among explicit energy democracy forces and consolidation of an energy democracy current in the U.S.

Please provide feedback: send comments to Al Weinrub, Coordinator of the Local Clean Energy Alliance (al.weinrub@comcast.net).

Framing the Issue

On October 10-12, 2012, Cornell's Global Labor Institute (GLI) conducted an international labor roundtable called Energy Emergency Energy Transition.¹ The roundtable attracted unionists from 18 countries.

The GLI roundtable framed the struggle for a global energy transition as an issue of democracy: "An energy transition can only occur if there is a decisive shift in power towards workers, communities and the public—*energy democracy*. A transfer of resources, capital and infrastructure from private hands to a democratically controlled public sector will need to occur in order to ensure that a truly sustainable energy system is developed in the decades ahead..."²

"Workers must have a real voice in how energy is generated and used. Energy must be recognized as a public good and basic right."³

The main framing document for the roundtable laid out a strategy for democratizing energy built around three broad objectives: the need to **resist** the agenda of the fossil fuel corporations; the need to **reclaim** to the public sphere parts of the energy economy that have been privatized or marketized; and the need to **restructure** the global energy system in order to massively scale up renewable energy and other safe low-carbon options, implement energy conservation, and ensure job creation and true sustainability.

Resisting the Corporate Energy Agenda

Most all climate activist organizations are engaged in efforts to contain the fossil-fuel establishment's increasingly desperate program of extreme energy extraction, climate destabilization, and environmental destruction, all geared toward further concentration of wealth and power.

¹ See <http://energydemocracyinitiative.org/>

² Sean Sweeney, *Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy*, October 2012 [<http://energydemocracyinitiative.org/required-reading-roundtable-discussion-document/>], Executive Summary

³ Sweeney, loc cit, Page 35

Many of these activist organizations have the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions or even transitioning to a de-carbonized energy system. Struggles against the further development of extreme energy are on the increase. In the U.S., opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline, deep ocean drilling, Arctic drilling, tar sands exploitation, coal exports, hydraulic fracturing ('fracking'), and new coal-fired power stations is increasingly visible and, to some degree, has been effective.

This opposition has awakened many people, politicized them around energy/climate issues, fueled an increasingly powerful grassroots opposition to the corporate energy agenda, and laid the groundwork for a more expansive societal critique. However, these movements are still mostly reactive and have exhibited, for the most part, only a limited political vision that does not address broader social and economic issues.

As an example, major parts of this movement fail to confront the capitalist growth imperative that jeopardizes the world's ecosystem or to address the globalized exploitation of human and natural resources that leaves billions of people struggling to survive.

Other forces within this movement, however, see resistance to the corporate energy agenda as a struggle for social and economic justice. They see this resistance as a key front in the battle to transform an economic system that has used fossil-fuel energy as the driver of capital accumulation and ecosystem destruction. For these "climate justice" forces, the struggle against the extreme fossil-fuel agenda is a struggle for community health, community resilience, and community empowerment. The struggle is not simply to de-carbonize the economic system, but to transform it.

Resistance to the corporate energy agenda therefore encompasses two very different political strategies for addressing the world's climate crisis: the De-carbonized Growth Strategy, which seeks to de-carbonize the current economic system in order to preserve it, and the Climate Justice Strategy, which seeks to create a new, ecologically-sound, economic system that can serve the needs of the world's peoples.⁴

Reclaiming Public Power

A major aspect of the struggle to democratize energy is a more explicit struggle to place energy under public control. This has often taken the form of a struggle against privatization (of water and energy) and efforts to re-municipalize energy systems that have been privatized.

These struggles, however, are often undermined by corporate control of the state (the government and its institutions). Hence, it is necessary to distinguish between *democratizing* energy and placing it in the *public* sphere: "public" does not mean the same thing as "democratically controlled."⁵

The October 2012 GLI labor roundtable recognized this contradiction: "Achieving energy democracy will entail a wholesale reorientation of existing public companies, a redefining of the political economy of energy around truly sustainable principles and a new set of priorities." The

⁴ Al Weinrub, *Labor's Stake in Decentralized Energy*, page 4 [http://energydemocracyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Labors-Stake_10-22-121.pdf]

⁵ David Hall, *The Social, Environmental and Trade Union Case for Public and Democratic Ownership of Energy* [<http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/finaldraft-DH-Cornell-2012.ppt>]

roundtable discussion document remarked on “the urgent need to assert democratic control and direction over major energy entities—and to put the public back in public ownership.”⁶

It went on to argue that “existing public entities that today behave like private or ‘state capitalist’ corporations be reoriented in ways that can address the energy emergency... The current business model for energy – based on commodification, profit, and limitless growth – needs to be abolished.”⁷

Restructuring Energy: The Decentralized Energy Model

The restructuring of energy systems towards ordinary citizens and communities involves not only the shift from fossil-fuel power to renewable power, but also the shift from corporate control of energy systems to more democratically controlled energy systems. Democratic control of *renewable* energy resources, in particular, is facilitated by the fact that renewable resources are *distributed*: solar, wind, biomass, energy conservation, and energy efficiency are resources found in all communities. This provides a basis for *decentralized* development of these resources at the local level through popular initiatives.

In this context, centralized and decentralized renewable energy systems are quite different, representing different political economies and different potentials for democratic control.

The centralized renewable energy model is primarily aligned with the Decarbonized Growth Strategy, the adherents of which hope to address the climate crisis by transitioning to renewable energy resources while maintaining all essential aspects of the existing capitalist economic system. Hence we see calls to transition to industrial-scale carbon-free energy resources while continuing the growth of energy consumption, material consumption, rates of capital accumulation, and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few.

The decentralized renewable energy model, on the other hand, is primarily aligned with the Climate Justice Strategy, the adherents of which hope to transition to new economic arrangements quite different from current capitalist relations. Hence we see calls not only to transition to carbon-free energy resources, but to sustainable economies which can reduce energy and material consumption to within the Earth’s ecological limits, which can more equitably distribute wealth and power, which can serve the needs of people, and which are more democratic in nature.⁸

The decentralized renewable energy model provides a powerful alternative to the current centralized energy model—one that can be more ecologically sound, more economically beneficial to communities, more effective in creating local employment, more sustainable, and more *open to democratic control*.⁹

Energy Democracy Implies Decentralized Control of Energy

Large, utility-scale, centralized generating systems are based on concentrated financial and economic power. Only on rare occasions are centralized energy developments impacted by

⁶ Sweeney, loc ct, page 49

⁷ Sweeney, loc cit, Page 35

⁸ Al Weinrub, loc cit, page 11

⁹ For detailed arguments about the benefits of decentralized energy systems, see: *Community Power: Decentralized Renewable Energy in California* [<http://communitypowerbook.com/>]

democratic action of communities, usually mobilized in opposition to such developments. In most cases centralized energy development represents the interests of powerful economic forces aided by a corporate state apparatus and unfettered by democratic restraints.

The development of decentralized energy resources, on the other hand, opens the possibility for communities to participate in the control of their energy resources.

The effort to democratize energy—to wrest control of energy resources and energy policy away from the dominant corporate energy establishment—requires an alternative energy model. The decentralized energy model offers the best prospects for communities to reassert democratic control over energy resources and renewable energy development.

Approaches to Decentralized/Democratized Renewable Energy

In response to the concentrated economic power and control of the energy establishment, many initiatives are promoting decentralized renewable energy systems, and the possibility they offer for community control and involvement in the development of local energy resources. These initiatives represent a number of approaches to more decentralized/democratized energy systems. Three of the most often pursued approaches are: collective/cooperative ownership, feed-in tariffs, and Community Choice energy.

Collective/Cooperative Ownership

One of the most popular approaches to democratizing energy is the effort to take renewable energy production out of the hands of large corporate enterprises by developing collectively-owned or cooperatively-owned electric generation facilities. These facilities would directly benefit the communities that build, own, and operate them.

In the U.S. these efforts have run up against many barriers to collective financing and ownership models. However, hundreds of initiatives are under way, using creative financing and legal structures: from partnerships, to limited-liability corporations, to cooperatives, to non-profit ownership, and so forth.

In most cases state-level legislation has helped promote these efforts. For example, some states have virtual net metering laws, which allow electricity customers to invest in a share of a generating facility and to treat that share as if it were a behind-the-meter installation on their own property.

These kinds of collective ownership projects have been chronicled in several publications and “how to” handbooks, exemplified by Greg Pahl’s book, *Power from the People*.¹⁰

Feed-in Tariffs

Notable in democratizing the generation of energy, especially in Europe and other countries, has been the use of feed-in tariffs. Feed-in tariffs provide must-take, standard-offer, utility contracts at a set long-term price for the purchase of generated renewable energy. They allow non-

¹⁰ LCEA, Greg Pahl on Community Power, November 2012 [<http://www.localcleanenergy.org/node/501>]

traditional electricity producers at a community level to compete with large-scale power producers, and thereby benefit financially from installing renewable energy generation capacity.

In Germany, for example, the impact of feed-in tariffs has been profound, resulting in a large percentage of renewable energy sources being owned by the people: “the Renewable Energy Sources Act enabled all sorts of people and businesses to invest and become an active part of the solution to the energy crisis of the 21st century. The system they’ve been building is growing rather naturally to utilize the potential of renewable energy sources in an efficient distributed way, close to the consumers themselves... It’s a system with more than 1 million independent energy producers at this point and it is increasingly focused on values like regional energy autonomy, democratic participation, self-determination, and economic common sense.”¹¹

This development has also changed energy politics at the state level, fueling the German energy transition (Energiewende), which favors renewables over nuclear power development, for example.

Community Choice Energy Programs

Democratization of energy is reflected in the establishment of Community Choice energy programs in California and six other states. Community Choice energy, provided for in California by AB 117 (2002), enables cities and other jurisdictions (rather than the incumbent investor-owned utility) to choose where the electricity provided to their residents and businesses will come from. This means that local communities can decide to procure their electricity from renewable energy sources: either by purchasing renewable electricity on the market, or more important, by developing local renewable energy resources in the community. Under a Community Choice energy program, the incumbent utility company continues to own the grid infrastructure and to deliver electricity and service customers.

A Community Choice energy program has an agency under public control in the driver’s seat of energy procurement, meaning that energy development can meet needs decided upon by that community. It is a direct opening for the expression of energy democracy at the community level.

Community Choice energy is a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address the impact of climate change by cutting energy consumption, switching to renewable energy sources, and building local renewable electricity generation. By developing local clean energy resources, Community Choice programs can spur local economic development in the community, provide good local clean energy jobs, offer price stability and competitive electric utility bills, reduce pollution, and provide other community benefits.

The Clean Energy & Jobs Oakland campaign¹² to establish a Community Choice energy program in the East San Francisco Bay Area is an example of mobilizing a community to open the door for energy democracy.

¹¹ Thomas, The Road to 2020, April 9, 2012 [<http://cleantechnica.com/2012/04/09/the-road-to-2020-part-ii-states-on-a-new-course/>]

¹² See the campaign web page at: <http://www.localcleanenergy.org/policy-platform/campaign2012>

Energy Democracy Proponents in the U.S.

A number of organizations in the U.S. are explicitly advocating for a democratization of energy. This advocacy spans a number of initiatives, each with a somewhat different emphasis, as outlined below.

Community Power Network

The Community Power Network (<http://communitypowernetwork.com/>) is a loose network of grass-roots, local, state, and national initiatives working to build, and promote community-based, local renewable energy projects. These initiatives have come together for mutual support in contending with the substantial legal, financial, and regulatory barriers to community, cooperative, and collective energy development projects.

These initiatives are deeply committed to their democratic right to participate in the transition to renewable energy on their own terms and to meet their own objectives. They reject the corporate energy monopoly's anti-democratic lock-out of community-based energy.

“All of us have a stake in a future where every community participates in the financial benefits of our energy grid's ongoing diversification from big central plants and passive consumers to a wider mix of distributed production and renewable energy.”¹³

The Community Power Network manages state-level Solar United Neighborhoods (SUN) programs—such as DC SUN, VA SUN, WV SUN and MD SUN—that facilitate local communities going solar. These programs have worked hard to promote policies that enable the development of solar in low income communities. For example, Community Solar legislation in Washington DC.

The mission of the Community Power Network is threefold:

- Help people start their own community-based renewable energy projects by providing resources, technical assistance, case studies, and connections to other practitioners.
- Help local groups influence policy and build power by providing support for strategic planning, fundraising, list building, petitions, and other tools.
- Create a network for existing community groups to connect, collaborate, and grow, and offer a set of [tools](#) and resources for partners to use.

Local Clean Energy Alliance (LCEA)

The Local Clean Energy Alliance (<http://www.localcleanenergy.org>) is the Bay Area's largest clean energy coalition, with 90 affiliated member organizations, including environmental, business, social equity, and community groups, working for a clean energy future in the Bay Area. The LCEA sees the development of local energy resources as key to growing sustainable business, advancing social equity, and promoting community health and resilience.

¹³ <http://www.communitypowernetwork.com/about>

The LCEA advocates that all communities, especially those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, benefit from a clean energy economy. The program of the LCEA includes both policy advocacy (energy reduction, local renewable generation, and energy democracy) as well as efforts to build a stronger clean energy movement in the Bay Area, one based on equity and economic justice, through community participation in energy advocacy.

The LCEA supports policies that promote community-based energy, supports feed-in tariff programs, advocates for Community Choice energy in the Bay Area and throughout the state, hosts the annual Clean Power, Healthy Communities conference, distributes its *Community Power* report¹⁴ and other publications, and builds alliances with other community organizations around local, regional, and state energy issues.

The LCEA calls for the development of local decentralized energy systems that integrate energy demand reduction and local renewable generation. The LCEA believes that it is through the combination of these energy resources that communities can achieve their full greenhouse gas reduction and climate resilience potential while enhancing local economies, providing clean energy jobs, and improving community health.

Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED)

In its report on the October 2012 Energy Emergency, Energy Transition labor roundtable, and as a continuation of the themes discussed in that setting, the Cornell Global Labor Institute announced the launch of Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (<http://energydemocracyinitiative.org/>), an initiative to build a global trade union community for energy democracy. This community is being built around the creation of “an agenda that addresses the energy emergency, protects people and nature, [and] builds trade union and worker power.” The agenda is meant to “promote a democratic, equitable approach to energy transition.”¹⁵

TUED is a global, multi-sector initiative to advance democratic direction and control of energy in a way that promotes solutions to the climate crisis, energy poverty, the degradation of both land and people, and the repression of workers’ rights and protections. Unions participating in TUED share the view that greater democratic direction, public intervention, community control, and social ownership over energy options and resources are urgently needed.

TUED aims to:

- Provide a space for trade unions from all sectors and countries to debate, develop and promote real solutions to the climate crisis—solutions that can build unions, worker and community power, and advance social and environmental justice.
- Help unions share information, analyses, develop educational materials, convene meetings, encourage debate, and facilitate connections to other movements and organizations that share similar goals.
- Encourage collaboration to develop strategies to build broad membership engagement and to share ideas and perspectives in the spirit of active solidarity and internationalism.

¹⁴ Al Weinrub, *Community Power: Decentralized Renewable Energy in California* (<http://communitypowerbook.com/>)

¹⁵ Cornell Global Labor Institute, *Final Report on: “Energy Emergency, Energy Transition” Global Trade Union Roundtable*, 12/5/12, page 8 (<http://energydemocracyinitiative.org/resources/>)

Institute for Local Self Reliance (ILSR)

One of the staunchest advocates for decentralized energy systems is John Farrell at the Institute for Local Self Reliance (<http://www.ilsr.org/>). In addition to publishing a weekly Energy Self Reliant States newsletter (<http://www.ilsr.org/initiatives/esrs/>), Farrell has authored *Democratizing the Electricity System: A Vision for the 21st Century Grid*.¹⁶

The ILSR is a think tank that supports advocacy to change government rules and regulations concerning renewable energy. “The rapid growth of distributed renewable energy has led utility planners and state and local governments to examine what the new rules of electricity generation and distribution will be in an age where households and businesses will be both producers and consumers of electricity. The result is a historic opportunity to democratize energy, develop energy efficiency, energy self-reliance and renew local communities.”¹⁷

Center for Social Inclusion (CSI)

The CSI (<http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org>), based in New York, includes energy democracy as one of its main program areas: “Now is the time for Energy Democracy. Its goal is to create community-owned or controlled renewable energy and to invest that capacity with democratic principles that foster interdependence, conservation, wealth-building, political autonomy, and economic opportunity.”¹⁸

“Small-scale, locally owned or controlled renewable energy projects can be structured to allow local investment, sweat equity, and a transparent process for setting fair prices. This vision of Energy Democracy has the power to transform neglected and isolated communities, often poor, often communities of color, into energy generators able to add power to the grid, meet the energy needs of their own communities, enhance political and economic ties with neighboring communities, and contribute to the nation’s capacity to independently produce clean, sustainable energy for all of our needs.”¹⁹

“Energy democracy means tackling climate and energy issues at the community level in ways that meet community needs and create multiple benefits for people, places, and the nation.”²⁰

CSI is advocating for instruments like Energy Investment Districts, which create legislated institutions for funding and supporting local energy resource development in disadvantaged communities. The CSI has supported and documented the development of locally-based community energy development initiatives in Boston, Brooklyn, and other cities.

¹⁶ John Farrell, *Democratizing the Electricity System: A Vision for the 21st Century Grid*, page 1
<http://www.ilsr.org/democratizing-electricity-system-vision-21st-century-grid/>

¹⁷ John Farrell, *Loc cit* page i

¹⁸ <http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/ideas/energy-democracy/>

¹⁹ CSI, *Energy Democracy: Community-scale Green energy Solutions*, May 2010, page 8.
<http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/energy-democracy-community-scale-green-energy-solutions/>

²⁰ CSI, *Energy Democracy: Supporting Community Innovation*, February 2012
<http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/category/publications/>

Climate Justice Alliance (CJA)

The Climate Justice Alliance (<http://www.ourpowercampaign.org/cja/>) is a collaborative of over 35 community-based and movement support organizations uniting frontline communities to forge a scalable and socio-economically just transition away from unsustainable energy towards local living economies to address the root causes of climate change.

The alliance is rooted in Indigenous, African American, Latino, Asian Pacific Islander, and working-class white communities throughout the U.S. These communities comprise more than 100 million people, often living near toxic, climate-polluting energy infrastructure or other facilities. As racially oppressed and/or economically marginalized groups, these communities have suffered disproportionately from the impacts of pollution and will be most affected by climate change, for example, by extreme weather and the disappearance of water.

The centerpiece of the CJA's organizing is the Our Power campaign, which has focused on initiatives in three hot-spot areas: Detroit, Black Mesa, and Richmond, CA. "Communities are already beginning to implement real solutions to climate change that chart a path towards a more democratic, ecologically rooted economies based on local control of resources. The Our Power Campaign will harness and amplify community-led solutions while pushing for national, state, and local governments to create millions of climate jobs – jobs that meet people's needs while caring for natural resources and ecosystems."²¹

Other Initiatives

The initiatives and organizations described above represent some of the more explicit expressions of an energy democracy framework. However, there are other organizations and initiatives in the U.S. which implicitly adopt this framework—for example, the California Environmental Justice Alliance,²² the Emerald Cities Collaborative,²³ The Renewable Communities Alliance,²⁴ and others.

Towards a National Energy Democracy Network

The last few years have seen the development of an increasingly self-conscious expression among climate advocates—especially climate justice advocates—for communities to take decisions about energy resources into their own hands, that is, to democratize energy. This paper has documented a number of these energy democracy initiatives and the perspectives behind them.

The effort to promote energy democracy, of course, is part of a broader agenda. It involves energy resource development and financing, and is therefore tied to the broader struggle for economic democracy, which, in turn, is part of the yet broader struggle for political democracy in the U.S.

²¹ <http://www.ourpowercampaign.org/campaign/>

²² See <http://caleja.org/>

²³ See <http://emeraldcities.org/>

²⁴ See <http://www.renewablecommunities.org/>

The Local Clean Energy Alliance would like to collaborate more closely with organizations across the U.S. that are trying to democratize energy. We are up against the most powerful interests in the world, and the collaboration between groups and people working toward similar goals is the best tool we have in the struggle.

We envision this collaboration in the form of a national energy democracy network. This network would consist of organizations that work to advance the development of locally controlled, equitable renewable energy resources. This network would push back against business-as-usual (centralized corporate) energy models and programs. It could help us develop strategies and programs, share resources, take positions on national energy issues, and so forth, as agreed to by network members. Such a network would increase the visibility of energy democracy as a way to frame the struggle against the energy establishment while pursuing the transition to alternative energy models as part of a broader transformation of society.

To this end we are asking you to provide feedback on this *Expressions of Energy Democracy* paper. We'd like to hear your reactions and gauge your interest in helping define and launch a national energy democracy network.