

Youth Organize for Planetary Survival

By Jihan Gearon

The fight for climate justice is a classic fight between good and evil, complete with global catastrophe, seemingly unstoppable villains, unlikely heroes, and the threat to life as we know it on this planet. The mythological scale of the issue makes it unlike any other we have ever faced, and adds to the difficulty of organizing around it to make any real change. It is a fight that cannot and will not be won overnight. It will take the continued hard work, dedication, and faith of generations of people. For this reason, today's youth and future generations play a critical role in the fight for climate justice. Luckily, many of us are taking up the challenge.

"Climate change is the big daddy of environmental justice problems," explains Clayton Thomas-Muller of the Indigenous Environmental Network. "It is the most critical issue in terms of the number of people impacted."

In the not too distant future, we can expect to see an increase in the number of extreme weather events, such as floods, hurricanes, droughts, and tornados; the creation of deserts; the flooding of coastal towns and island nations; the spread of infectious diseases; wars over food, water, and land; the displacement of people; and the extinction of cultures, species, and ecosystems. This is an issue that will, without a doubt, affect every single living being on the planet in a very profound way.

Despite the seriousness and urgency of the problem, communities are slow to act on it, in large part because the global nature of the climate change issue is not easy to grasp. According to Jill Johnston of the Southwest Workers Union (SWU), "With environmental justice fights, you are taking on an enemy that's right there in your community, but with climate change, it's harder for people to see that direct connection, even if it exists. Most work on climate [justice] is at the national or international level, which is separate from the people."

Adds Diana Abellera of Redefining Progress, of the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative, "The climate justice movement links... the

fossil fuel industry, globalization, toxic facilities, and climate science to deeply rooted systems of oppression, such as racism, colonialism, and capitalism. Understanding how these systems have led to our dependency on fossil fuels requires a somewhat complex and thorough analysis of modern American society, so combining these abstract concepts can be challenging."

This unique challenge, however, can also be turned into an advantage for those working on the issue—in unprecedented ways.

"Climate justice isn't just about reducing fossil fuels, improving agricultural processes, or changing urban design. It's about changing the consciousness of society, changing the things we value, especially in the United States," says Clayton Thomas-Muller.

Without a doubt, our current way of life is unsustainable, but because those with power in the world have given in to greed, we are now at a point of no return. Even if we were to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by the necessary amount today, we would still face more hurricanes and droughts, the mass extinction of species, and the displacement of large populations. We, the youth, are fully aware of this as we step up to take on the fight for climate justice.

Listen to Youth... for a Change

In the Gulf Coast region, last year's hurricanes have spurred the organization of several events to



educate the general public about the connection between the hurricanes, climate change, and fossil fuels. Next September, we will see the culmination of two years of work done by youth, with the bi-national Gulf Coast Conference, hosted by the SWU. The conference aims to bring together grassroots communities and workers in the U.S. and Mexico, to strategize and discuss the future of energy in the Gulf Coast.

Indigenous youth in the Southwest are experimenting with some innovative sustainable practices, explains Wahleah Johns of the Black Mesa Water Coalition. "Here, in Arizona, we are taking a proactive approach to solving climate change. Youth are making connections with people in the community to develop projects around energy-efficient building and growing food, so that we're not dependent on outside resources. In re-learning and practicing our traditional techniques, we are creating long-term sustainability at the local level."

As part of a nationwide Campus Climate Challenge campaign, Indigenous Environmental Network, the Black Mesa Water Coalition, and the EJCC are reaching out to colleges and universities that largely serve Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous populations, to get students involved in the fight for climate justice. In addition to educating youth on renewable energy matters, these organizations will facilitate the development of relationships between students and community leaders.

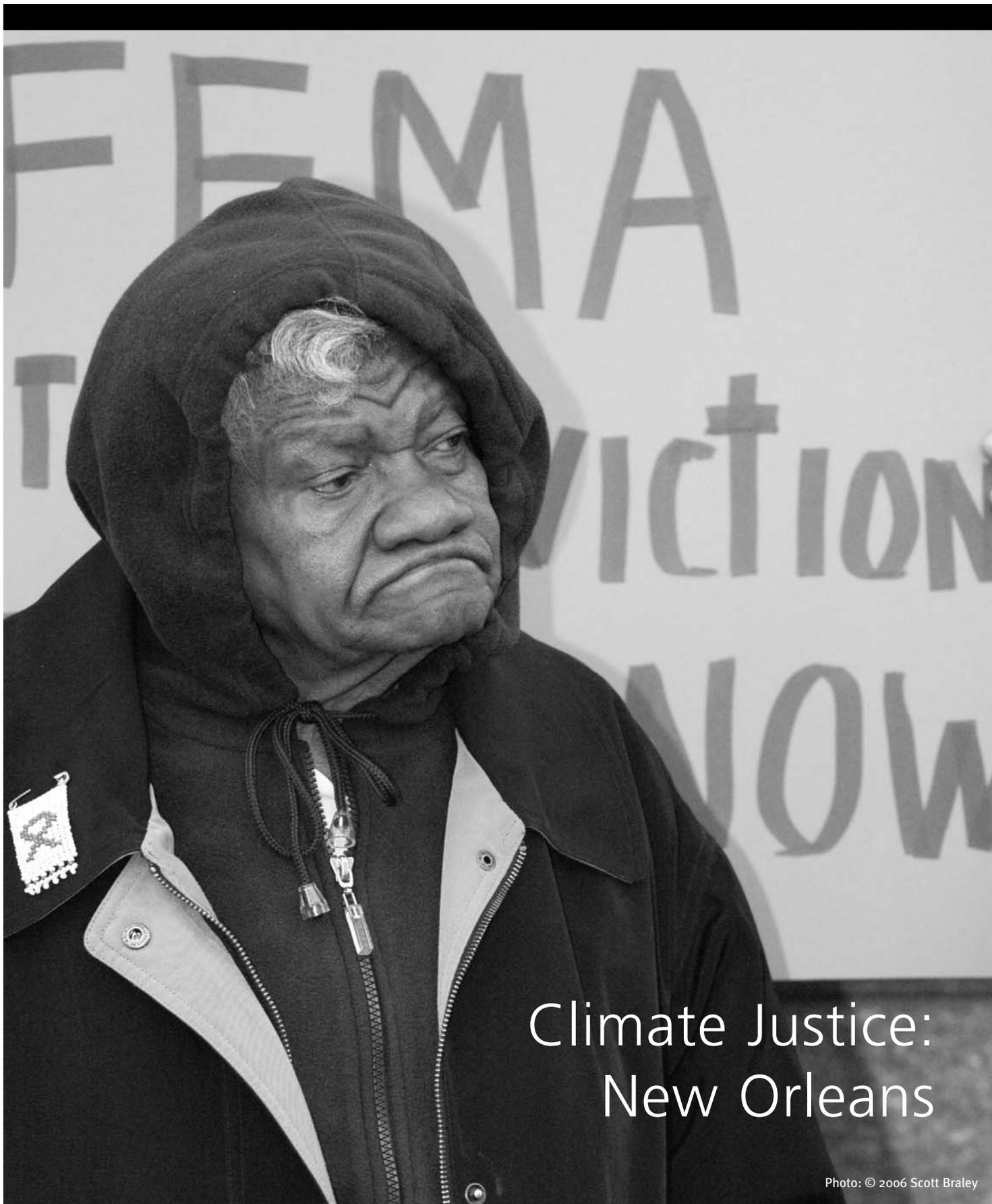
This fall marks the launch of the EJCC's Climate Justice Institute, a program developed to build young leaders who are prepared for a long-term fight for climate justice. The Institute will serve to train and

motivate youth leaders from communities disproportionately affected by climate change, through workshops and internships, and other resources necessary to effectively engage in the fight for climate justice.

Youth are also making an impact at the international level. In December 2005, the EJCC was able to include 10 youth in its delegation to the 11th Conference of the Parties and First Meeting of the Parties on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Montreal, Canada. These youth facilitated workshops and organized events; spoke on climate justice and youth leadership panels; and participated in and led the daily strategy meetings of international youth. The result is, the International Youth Declaration: Our Climate, Our Challenge, Our Future, which advocates a human rights-based approach to tackling climate change.

As I see it, we, the youth of today, have little choice. Faced with a future full of disasters, wars, disease, and destruction, rather than be scared or depressed, some of us have chosen to fight back. We are putting our faith in our own abilities to make a better future for ourselves. We understand the urgency of the issue and know that it will not be an easy fight. We know that it will require breaking down the old barriers of race and geography. We also realize that we are the underdogs. But as Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Jihan Gearon works at Redefining Progress where she is the Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative program associate.



Climate Justice: New Orleans

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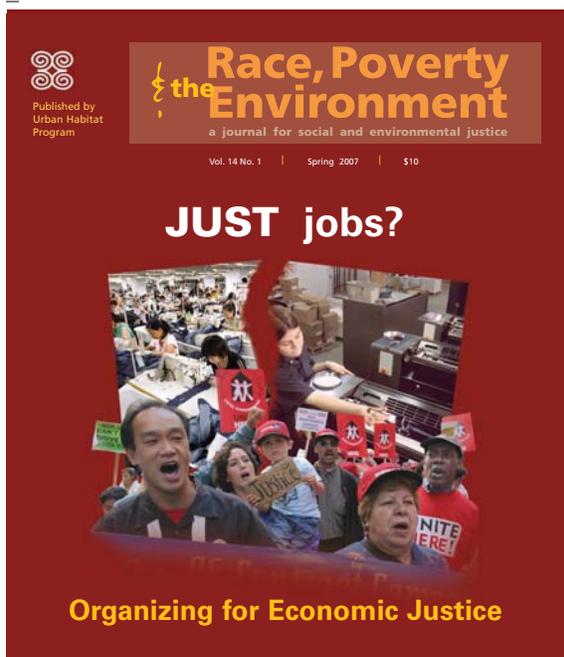
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