

## **Huntley, a Case Study:**

### **Building Strategic Alliances for Real Change**

**By Richard Lipsitz, President Western New York Area labor Federation, AFL-CIO**

**and**

**Rebecca Newberry, Executive Director, Clean Air Coalition of Western New York**

A study recently released by the University of Melbourne cites without any hesitation or equivocation that the 2013-2014 heat wave in Australia was the direct result of the use of fossil fuels. This is one very good example of an issue which has overwhelming scientific support: The burning of fossil fuels is the cause of the climate change crisis. It is a man-made phenomenon and will, if not abated, lead to an ever-greater destruction of the environment of this planet. However, it can be combated, and as such, it must be addressed. On this fact, there is literally no scientific debate.

The question must be asked: who are the forces denying this reality and what can be done to transform our energy production and energy needs to stop this destructive path.

At its base, the climate change issue exposes underlying economic forces. The leading deniers of climate change are in the fossil fuel business. For them, moving away from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources represents a profound crisis - a crisis of profits and the continuing government subsidies that have made them rich. This is particularly true of the Koch Brothers and their various public offspring. They buy elections and pay for spokespeople on the ultra right in order to continue to expand an empire built on destroying the environment.

For the broad masses of the world's people solutions must be found in such a manner as to improve economic well-being; not as an excuse to shift the burden of needed changes onto their backs. Fortunately, such a path does exist.

The key concept is that of a Just Transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. A Just Transition does not destroy jobs, it creates hundreds of thousands of new ones; it helps communities keep services and schools, it doesn't gut them; it expands public transportation with modern more efficient buses and trains; it fosters public/private partnerships like Solar City, built on the site of the old Republic Steel; and it provides opportunities for co-operative worker owned businesses that are powered by green energy.

Further, we must dedicate massive investment in crumbling infrastructure and pay for it by ending subsidies to the oil and gas industry. The redirecting of the resources of our society towards a complete rebuilding of the roads, dams, public buildings and energy grid will take hundreds of billions of dollars. It will take a supreme political effort and cannot be accomplished except through the most intense struggle. This struggle must be legislative and political. It means that literally millions of people must become active and demand new priorities for the use of public dollars. It does not necessarily mean government ownership or complete government control. It does necessitate a mix of private money with public. Private capital alone cannot provide the resources for such a herculean task. The government must step in and make the best use of the wealth of the whole society. There is no other path. Further, clear guidelines and real planning is key. The problem will not be solved through the “magic” of the marketplace or by “releasing the productive forces of free enterprise.”

A political solution to this very serious problem is required. Today, the politics are determined by the interests of the financial sector. Industries no longer invest based on what is good for the production of goods and services. We have a parasitical class of vulture capitalists whose only concern is producing profits paid through the selling of stock options and stock dividends. This motive will not result in reforming the economy in the interests of the working people.

The key to a mass movement is to build the leadership of organizations that are based in the interests of working people and are led by people directly affected by energy transition. Local organizing is necessary. Strategic alliances between unions and community organizations based among working people can form a powerful bloc to fight for a clear path of transition.

The Huntley Coalition is one such alliance. The genesis of this coalition is based in the real world consequences of the retirement of the Huntley coal plant Tonawanda, New York. Tonawanda is a first ring, working class suburb of Buffalo. Huntley’s retirement process began years before the company announced closure. Before the announcement was made, a PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) was agreed upon by the Town, and funds for the town’s general expenses and the School Board were cut. The PILOT was based on the level of production. As production was reduced, so were the payments. The result was serious cuts to the school district, cuts in educational programming and layoffs of teachers and support staff. In addition, the workforce at the plant was slashed, going from 125 jobs down to 75.

This initial stage was a crisis of fairly severe proportions to the Tonawanda community. The problem called out for a solution and provided an opportunity to build a coalition. Clearly, the workers in the school district and the power plant were key. In addition, the population of the Town, including those around the plant who were being hit hard by the loss of vital services. Finally, the question of the environmental impact of a dirty coal belching plant brought those who are involved in the fight against climate change into motion. These same forces are in play all over the US and in fact, the entire industrial world. The trick is how and on what basis can unity of purpose be achieved among and between these forces.

The Kenmore Tonawanda Teachers Association (KTA) reached out to the Western New York Area Labor Federation, AFL-CIO (WNYALF), for assistance. In the fall of 2013, a meeting was held with the KTA, the Steelworkers (USW), the Electrical Workers (IBEW), the Clean Air Coalition, and the Sierra Club at the behest of the WNYALF. The first meeting went well and the groups decided to work together. Unfortunately, in the midst of the initial attempts at coalition building, the Sierra Club held a demonstration outside the plant calling for it to be shut down. This action opened the way for the political leaders of the Tonawanda community to go on the offensive and accuse the coalition of trying to sabotage the plant. As a result, the initial attempt at coalition building failed.

Here let's pause and consider the implications of this failed attempt at coalition building. We were dealt a setback, but not a fatal one. If we are to arrive at solutions to this very complicated situation where programs are found that benefit the community and the workers, extraordinary planning is required. The oil, gas and coal industry has ruled the roost for over one hundred years. They are a major voice in economic policy and they have billions of dollars. They are heavily subsidized by the federal government. They are a very dangerous opponent on the question of climate change. Further, NRG, the company that owns Huntley, has a long-term relationship with the union at the plant. Building a successful coalition around the transition in Tonawanda requires a great deal of tactical and strategic sense. Holding a demonstration that calls for the shutdown of the plant did not help this cause. The IBEW ran the other way and the coalition was finished for six months.

However, the problem did not go away. No magic bullet was discovered that would pay for the damage done to the workers and the community, or that answered the question of what to do with the plant site. Instead, the PILOT continued to be reduced and the squeeze on the community did not let up.

The WNYALF and the Clean Air Coalition decided to try again. In order to build a durable group, we pointed to the damage inflicted on the community and the workforce by the reduction in revenue – our working group included unions with the most to lose, the IBEW and the Kenmore Teachers Association. We opened the discussion on how to take care of people if a potential shut down happens. Various joint activities were undertaken. A web video was produced. Door to door work began, and real solutions regarding bridge funding, job training and economic development on the site of the physical plant took were identified.

For about two years the Huntley Alliance met, carried out joint work and prepared for several alternatives. Ideas for alternatives were created at community meetings, attended by Town residents – many who live closest to the plant. To ground our work, residents created a list of guiding criteria for what an acceptable economic transition would look like:

- Maintain fair funding for our schools
- Protect workers
- Create good-paying jobs with benefits
- Reconnect our town to our waterfront

- Build and sustain a new tax base
- Protect ratepayers
- Improve our environment and our public health.

In all this activity, we maintained a healthy independence from the political leadership in regard to tactical decisions. This we have guarded with great clarity. In fact, we only began to seek out support from various political leaders when we had a real task for them to perform. Independence from the political leadership that is vulnerable to the demands of the company, and reliance on the working people of the community, is key.

By winter/spring of 2015, it became more and more clear that NRG was preparing for the closure of the plant. The Huntley plant, like coal plants around the country, could not make a profit, due to rising coal and transportation costs, low natural gas prices and an energy surplus. Production at the plant was less than 10% of capacity, and the amount of money paid to the Town through the PILOT continued to diminish.

When the company finally announced retirement in August of 2015, we had identified resources, we had a plan, and we had built community power. One of our biggest successes was establishing \$30 million in the state's budget this year to help support Tonawanda and communities like it across New York facing power plant closures. The fund will provide money to the Town, School District and County to replace lost Huntley revenues for 5 years. The resources will protect teachers' jobs and maintain the quality of public education. It is one of the first appropriations of its kind in the country. We also secured federal dollars to help the town plan for the future through the Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER+ Plan), a federal program that coordinates efforts among multiple federal agencies to align federal economic and workforce-development programs. This planning work began this summer.

Looking at the history of economic development in this country, a number of lessons can be learned. Progress must be directed by the people most affected – too often decisions are made by people who don't face any real risk, and will not be impacted by the outcome. Without planning and execution, the landscape becomes littered with old buildings, brownfields and vacant property. We do not want the Huntley site in Tonawanda to follow this pattern. Further, financial resources are needed to take care of communities transitioning. All levels of government need to coordinate and leverage funding to minimize pain for the short term, and long term. The energy transition is happening now, and we need real resources to address the difficult problems facing workers and working class communities.