

## Sunflower Power at Chevron's Gates

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By Paul W. Rea, PhD



I'd wanted to bear witness, but hadn't imagined getting *so* close to protesters and the police. Just 30 feet away, burly special-squad officers loomed over us—all in black, wearing helmets,

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bulletproof vests, shoulder protectors, and padded gloves. White plastic body immobilizers dangled below their nightsticks.

On both sides, the scenario was pre-scripted for nonviolence. The officers understood they were to treat those doing civil disobedience professionally, using absolutely minimal force. Protesters, most of whom had done non-violence training, sat facing the police, avoiding provocative behavior. Some even lined up and stepped forward to be arrested.

But these protesters were hardly passive. Especially brave souls soon emerged, some of them rising to exhort the crowd. Ellen Small, a 90-years-young grandma, celebrated the courage to commit civil disobedience: she needed to stand and shout, she said, because “The situation is desperate, and I’m here to help call attention to that.”

When the group of several hundred shouted “Hey, Obama, we don’t want your Keystone [pipeline] drama,” everyone joined in. It was empowering to bellow, full throated, from deep in the gut. But when the group began to chant, “Another world is possible, and we are *all* responsible,” I began to choke up. Change would come not by blaming but by taking personal responsibility. Then, as the men in black began to take people away and the group began to chant “this is doing democracy,” I wept. First my voice quavered, then it went silent. The Brass Liberation Orchestra

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struck up the Dixieland classic “St. James Infirmary”—but this was no occasion for hospitals or mourning. Not at all, for the mood was exultant. Spirits soared.

These were only the last among many emotional moments. Others had come when the many hundreds of demonstrators raised their sunflowers in unison to say “trust the sun” and celebrate regeneration. One “gray beard” crowed “I haven’t had this much fun since the 1960s” (<http://www.kpfa.org/archive/id/94138>).

## **A Very Diverse, Very Large Turnout**

On Saturday August 3, in Richmond, California, twenty eight hundred high-spirited, sunflower-holding demonstrators marched nearly three miles to the gate of Chevron’s vast refinery. This colorful mass protest commemorated the explosion and fire at the refinery last year, one that sent 15,000 area residents to the hospital (<http://ecowatch.com/2013/208-arrested-protesting-climate-chaos-at-chevron-refinery/>). Due to the toxic fallout, thousands of vegetable gardens in the area had to be pulled up. Because sunflowers can cleanse the soil of toxins, they made the perfect symbols of regeneration.

Summer Heat, as it was aptly named, wasn’t just another gathering of “the usual suspects,” however. The turnout of nearly 3000 included young people, families with children, even a stroller brigade. It was pluralistic in every way—multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial. Since many had never marched

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before, it was super important for them to have such a positive first experience.



In all, 210 protestors sat down on company property, refusing to move while waiting to be arrested, booked, photographed, and released. Clearly the police weren't anticipating such numbers; it took them more than four hours to process all the "lawbreakers." According to Rev. Jeff Spencer of Fremont, the police not only ran out of zip cuffs, but of forms for those they were arresting: "When I got processed, they had to scrounge for paperwork. And the battery on their mug-shot camera had gone dead, so they had to grab something else—a cell phone, I think."

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Police officials commented on how well organized the event was and, without quite saying so, on how the protesters largely policed themselves. This was hardly something to overlook, since undisciplined crowds, some of them led by gang members, have recently discredited demonstrations in Oakland, Los Angeles and other places. More than any rally in recent memory, Summer Heat demonstrated the crucial importance of preparation, communication, and imagination—the key factors which allowed this event to stay on message.

## **Merging Local with Global Concerns**

In a brilliant stroke, the organizers of Summer Heat merged local with global demands. They insisted the corporate giant stop processing dirty crude oil, address long-neglected health and safety concerns, cease its tax manipulation, and end its political machinations. In addition to local demands, organizers also raised global issues—especially climate chaos and the role of Canadian tar sands and hydraulic fracking to the increase in greenhouse gases. Coordinated by 350BayArea.org, the demonstration capitalized on the disturbing disclosure that greenhouse gases had risen above a manageable 350 to a dangerous 400 parts per million.

Local and global issues came together in the calls for the company to reverse its increasing reliance on dirty “tar sands” crude oil. Such crude not only contains more sulfur, but also more

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lead and mercury, all of which pollute air and water, exacerbating public health problems. Equally troubling from a climate-crisis viewpoint is that dirty crude takes more energy to refine, enlarging the carbon footprint left by every gallon of gas.

Greg Karras, lead scientist for California-based Communities for Better Environment, has underscored what's become obvious: "If we're going to avoid the worst of climate change, we need to leave oil in the ground. That oil should be the dirty crude"

(<http://www.kpfa.org/archive/date/2013/08/06>). The message was simple: "It's the cruddy crude, dude."

## **Unprecedented Coalition Delivers the Message**

Communities for Better Environment, which advocates for environmental justice, was only one among many groups, all of them bringing together public health, economic, and ecological concerns, which made Summer Heat such a spectacular success. Other contributors and sponsors included 350.org, 350BayArea.org, Keystone Action Council, Idle No More, Gathering Tribes, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Greenpeace, The Center for Biological Diversity, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Urban Tilth, Food & Water Watch, and other groups.

Missing as sponsors, however, were many of the major environmental groups. These included the Sierra Club, which

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boasts 30,000 members in the Bay Area. Michelle Myers, Director of the Club's San Francisco Bay Chapter, acknowledged that the Club didn't put its full weight behind the rally because the publicity emphasized doing civil disobedience, which its Board of Directors had approved for only one event. The success of nonviolent direct action against Chevron may encourage more green groups to do what's needed in these dire times.

But in other cases the problem may have resided with the influence of corporate funders, the same interests that control both major parties. For several years, the Sierra Club has maintained a special relationship with Chevron (<http://commonwealthclub.blogspot.com/2009/06/chevron-and-sierra-club-unusual.html>). And while the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) might claim, along with Sierra, that the rally's plan for direct action was the main reason for not becoming a sponsor, fear of losing corporate money may have done the talking.

Given limited support from Environment California, the California League of Conservation Voters, EarthJustice, and other such groups, the key to the rally's success was progressive labor, the 28 different unions—especially the California Nurses Association, OPEIU Local 3, UNITE HERE 2850, and AFSME Locals 57 and 3299, which were emphatic about “No Frackin’ Way!” One hub for organizing these groups was the Richmond

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Progressive Alliance—a dynamic organization of community activists with an impressive record: the Alliance has helped elect Green Party officials and almost passed a city tax on sugar-laced drinks.

With unions supplying crucial resources, and with community and environmental groups offering strong organizational support, Summer Heat marked a historic breakthrough in coalition building. Instead of seeing environmental groups as advocating conservation measures that often did not speak to working people—or that could even cost their jobs—leaders of the coalition emphasized how industrial pollution, climate change, and corporate corruption of politics are affecting everyone. Once forged, such coalitions hold the promise delivering future actions.

## **Commemorating Tragedy for Powerful Effect**

The first anniversary of the fire, towering cloud, and health emergency served as a powerful springboard. Organizers tapped into residual anger, putting it on target.

After so many years of chronic health problems, the citizens of Richmond are fed up with Chevron. People made this clear. As we marched, one woman touched the hood of her car, holding up a finger blackened by soot. “That’s just since yesterday,” she growled. One could only shudder to think what such fine particles

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were doing to her lungs.

Sounding a call for environmental justice, an insistence that lower-income people and minorities must not be forced to live with toxic pollutants, organizers delivered a truly diverse, very large turnout. As we marched toward the gate, the line of marchers extended around bends in the route, as far as the eye could see.

## **Speakers Connect Past, Present, and Future**

This rally wasn't built around big-name speakers. Of those who spoke, most were organizers of the event. Instead of the rhetorical indictments that characterize many rallies, inspiring speeches reflected both serious thinking and positive solutions.

Andrés Soto, a lead organizer with Communities for a Better Environment, enlightened the crowd with perceptive comments on the importance of August 6, linking war with environmental violence: "On this day we remember the bomb our government dropped on Hiroshima. But this is also the day that Chevron dropped a bomb on the people of Richmond."

Gayle McLaughlin, Green Party Mayor of Richmond, pointed to the eleven citations against Chevron for safety violations at the facility and, partially as a result of such negligence, the fact that the City suffers the highest rates of asthma in the state. "If only Chevron would put all the money it pours into

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buying elections and corporate PR into better safety measures,” she lamented.

Nor did the Mayor stop with words, however eloquent. Within the hour she had joined those about to be handcuffed by the police. This too was historic. How often does a public official feel so strongly about public health and democratic process that she's willing to trespass against her city's major employer and get arrested by the city's own police department? That's gutsy.

But it was Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* and co-founder of 350.org, who most engaged the crowd. Arm around his wife, Sue, McKibben praised both the diversity of the turnout and the large labor contingent, rightly adding “the spirit [here] is beautiful.”

After calling for a tax on carbon consumption, McKibben encouraged the crowd to commit civil disobedience: “Getting arrested is not the end of the world when you believe passionately enough in something to get arrested for it. But the end of the world *is* the end of the world. And that's what we're here to stop.” Delivered by most speakers, such an apocalyptic statement could have seemed like rhetorical overkill. Spoken by someone as earnest as McKibben, however, this line resonated with the crowd.

## **Great Team of Organizers Delivers the Message**

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The work of the organizers was simply stellar. They did the hard work of making connections across difference to build trust, promote cooperation, and bring out a huge crowd. In addition to Andrés Soto, Brooke Anderson worked highly effectively with environmental justice groups in Richmond.

An organizer hired by 350.org, Ms. Anderson drew on prior experience to deliver the labor contingent. She worked closely with key local labor-leaning organizations, especially the Richmond Environmental Justice Council, mending any strains in the seams. Anderson helped union members understand that while standing in solidarity with other workers is indeed a priority, so is opposing the causes of a degraded quality of life. While it's important to support workers who might find (temporary) work building pipelines, it's crucial for all of us to grasp how poor and working people continue to pay the highest price for both a carbon-based economy and the climate chaos it's causing

(<http://www.kpfa.org/archive/id/94138>).

## **Climate Justice Movement Scores Media Coup**

Getting news coverage has long posed a challenge for progressive event planners, but this time those doing media did an outstanding job before, during, and after the event. Although Bill McKibben, a nationally-known author, intellectual, and activist,

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could be counted on to interest journalists, organizers were savvy enough not to make Summer Heat a one-man show.

Effective media work is often a team effort: talented activists put in long days sending out releases, contacting groups about co-sponsorship, and arranging or doing interviews. Ultimately, the event's success stemmed from the dedicated efforts of talented individuals, many of them contributing their professional and personal expertise, others coming rapidly up to speed as committed amateurs.

Not surprisingly, the media coverage was diverse as the rally itself:

- Television news coverage included several California stations, Link TV, and most notably Rachel Maddow on MSNBC.

A YouTube channel provides an assemblage of TV coverage:

(<http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoYKCdxHLZbEvkdah7gyrPQ/videos>).

- Radio coverage included KQED (NPR) San Francisco, KALW FM San Francisco, Pacifica's "Democracy Now," and the Evening News at KPFA FM Berkeley.

- Newspaper stories ran in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Marin Independent Journal*, *Sacramento Bee*, and other papers. Event organizers also received calls from major magazines, including *The Nation*.

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Adding to this success with mass media outlets, an outburst of social media reached additional people, helping to swell the crowd and keep the buzz going.

### **Creativity Carries the Day**

A range of talented artists—musicians, actors, muralists, graphic designers, and street puppeteers all contributed to the creative outburst. Many of the artistic flourishes—the banners, posters, and humongous *papier maché* puppets—came from the teeming brain of David Solnit, activist, writer, artist, and puppeteer. David is the brother of activist writer Rebecca Solnit, now a fully-risen star in the literary firmament.

Visual themes ran like threads through a tapestry. The sunflower motif was expressed not only with thousands of individual flowers carried by protesters, but on postcards, posters, banners, and street murals. Hundreds of signs trumpeted “Sunflower, Sun Power.” And, as though on cue, nature responded to the call: the sun burned through just as the 2800 marchers reached the refinery gate, underscoring their calls for more solar power and renewable energy.

In fact, everything about the event was fresh and creative—including the banners and signs. Connecting labor with the much-disparaged Keystone XL pipeline, one sign announced “Plumbers Against the Pipe.”

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But even this wasn't all. As I walked away from the gate area, I noticed a large plywood sign. Done in Chevron's colors, it looked so official, but wait, hold on . . . Organizers had replaced the corporate signage with a facsimile reminding us that Chevron's profits last year came to a cool \$26.2 billion, that the company's gross negligence had sent 15,000 people to the hospital following last year's fire, and that Chevron is "the Number One Greenhouse Gas Emitter in California\*," a fact footnoted to \*The California Air Resources Board.

## **High Fives All Around**

A few days after the rally, Bill McKibben sent out emails recalling "an incredible event by the Bay." That it was. But Bill was far from the only one to be impressed. Surprised by the largest demonstration in Richmond's history, Police Chief Chris Magnus remarked "people made their point and conducted themselves in a thoughtful way" (<http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/elist/>).

Important as these appraisals are, it's even more important that progressives with relatively little experience working together—environmentalists, community activists, labor rank and file—all came together to pull off a truly memorable, confidence-building, life-affirming occasion. One tired marcher, a veteran of many protests, told a friend "Ya know, there might even be hope." Amen.

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Raising hopes far beyond Chevron's gates, Richmond Summer Heat was only one of eleven 350.org events turning up the heat nationwide. While this event pulsed with the spirit of Rosie the Riveter, the city's most famous resident, another Summer Heat event was going on in Albuquerque, NM. In addition to these, events were also planned for Washington, DC; Camp David, MD; South Portland, ME; Brayton Point, MA; St. Ignacio, MI; Warren, OH; Portland, Oregon; Green River, UT; and Houston, TX.

Much as the world is experiencing rising sea levels, the US and Canada are seeing a rising tide of protest against everything involved with ravaging the earth to extract the last fossil fuels. The upsurge couldn't come at a more crucial time.

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Paul W. Rea, PhD, is a former humanities professor and long-time activist and writer. The author of *Canyon Interludes* (1995) and *Mounting Evidence* (2011), Paul is now at work on another book, this one on Western attitudes toward nature.