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USA

# The New York City People's Climate March: Looking Back at September 21st

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**Thousands of us who traveled to New York City to participate in the People's Climate March and the activities surrounding the Sunday, September 21st action have now returned home, organizing reportbacks and thinking about how this event pushed the movement forward.**

Some have complained—both before the march and afterwards—that it was a symbolic action without official demands and heavy corporate funding, while others objected to the fact that we even marched away from the site of the one-day UN conference on climate change. I myself was initially disturbed by the fact that the march route turned at 42nd Street and traveled away from the United Nations, but I found that turning our backs was empowering.

The march brought together something on the order of 400,000 people and more than 1,500 participating organizations, all opposing the ineffective policies of governments, beginning with the United States. Above all, the marchers called for stopping the policies that subsidize fossil fuel production. The slogans and chants indicated that demonstrators were demanding alternatives to a society based on profitability. The fact that there was no general slogan, and no policing of slogans, revealed a range of statements from the very personal to the very political—sometimes within the very same message! People were not asking for half-measures, but stating what we need.

In fact, the contingents and their chants, banners, costumes, puppets, and props displayed a wealth of knowledge about alternatives, from ending war production to developing public transportation, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture. These ideas, as well as even more visionary ones, were expressed with creativity and a good deal of humor. This breadth, instead of making the action more “respectable” as some left-wing commentators feared, pushed the event in a more radical direction.

Attempting to wait out the event, police finally arrested 102 as night fell, including someone in a polar bear suit. While many who attended the sit-in felt overwhelmingly positive about the action, others were frustrated by the failure to reach the steps of the exchange as energy slipped away since there was no contingency plan.

## Actions and the Future

The breadth of the march also opened up space for conferences and other actions. This benefited the more radical end of the spectrum, which organized additional events:

System Change Not Climate Change [\[1\]](#) along with Global Climate Convergence [\[2\]](#) held a conference with over 100 workshops the day before, attracting 2500 participants. The range of topics was impressive and the final plenary included talks by grassroots activists Olga Bautista, from the Southeast Side Coalition Against Petcoke; Desmond D'Sa, 2014 Goldman Prize recipient from South Africa; and Naomi Klein, whose new book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* had just been released.

Trade Unions for Energy Democracy also held a conference before the march, with participation from national and international unions.

Flood Wall Street, an action involving 3,000 people, took place the day following the march. Organized by the

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Climate Justice Action, its slogan was "Stop Capitalism. End the Climate Crisis." Although the plan was to sit in on the steps of the Stock Exchange, police put up barricades and marchers ended up sitting on lower Broadway.

While radical journalist Chris Hedges had counterposed Flood Wall Street to the mass march, it's clear in retrospect that the size and breath of the march enabled the various other events to be as strong and successful as they were. The debate over demonstration tactics is hardly new: this was also an issue during the anti-Vietnam protests. There, too, direct actions were part of the mobilization days, but separated from the large action given that most people are unable to commit themselves to the possibility of arrest.

From the perspective of many revolutionary-minded organizations, building demonstrations is important in showing the breadth of the movement for social change. For everyone who marches, many more feel at one with the demonstration, and often begin to act as a result of seeing its power and confidence. The goal is to win the vast majority to understanding the seriousness of the problem, a sense of what it takes to overcome it and a willingness to act.

Given the scope of how fossil fuels control production and transportation processes, create a toxic environment, and reinforce inequality, the vast majority have a lot to think through. That so many constituencies joined the march reveals that understanding has moved to a higher plane. In this regard I'd like to note three important elements:

The environmental justice movement—led by African American, Native American, and Latino people who have fought against toxic waste dumps, mining, incinerators, and coal-fired plants that are overwhelmingly in their communities—played a key role in the march and related activities.

Labor's participation was noticeable. At least 75 unions endorsed and many encouraged members to turn out. The effect of Hurricane Sandy on metro New York City has awakened many city unions to the reality of climate change. Since fossil fuel industries boast of how many jobs they are creating, union members have been forced to think concretely about how their livelihoods will be affected by moving to alternative energy. Of course it is easier for transit workers and bus drivers to see the need to build mass transit, but all workers are forced consider how their work can be reorganized in order to insure a future.

What kind of society demands jobs that maim and destroy people's lives? Why should a worker fear the danger of unsafe working conditions? Why should communities be dependent on the mercy of corporations? Yet fear of job loss is the tool through which the fossil fuel industry has been able to keep people from demanding a swift transition to new ways of organizing industrial and agricultural production.

The participation of queer activists also brings new energy and confidence to the movement.

In building for the People's Climate March, organizers stressed "To Change Everything, We Need Everyone." While I'm only speaking about the New York City event, the march did not occur only there. Indeed, 2646 solidarity events took place in 162 countries—a big step forward!

*October 22, 2014*

[Against the Current](#)

[1] <http://systemchangenotclimatechange.org/>

[2] <http://systemchangenotclimatechange.org/>