

## **Building Coalitions – beating climate change**

### **No Dash for Gas as a catalyst group for generalising and upping the ante on climate justice activism in the UK**

- 1) No Dash for Gas started out as a direct-action affinity group, backed up with research and key messages to controversialise Gas and fossil fuels, challenge the government and big business agenda on new Gas and promote democratically controlled renewable energy.

We were focused on shutting down and occupying the first of up to 40 new gas power stations in October 2012 – EDF's West Burton – the day that it was to go online. The message was: 1) Gas isn't green, it is almost as pollutant as coal. If we got for it, we'll crash our UK carbon targets/violate the 2008 Climate Change Act 2) we cannot afford Gas, environmentally or economically. We must invest in renewables and not fossil fuels if we are to avoid climate change 3) Gas is not the answer to fuel poverty, thousands of people die in the UK every year due to cold homes. Gas is unstable, expensive and owned by six utilities companies in the UK which have a a stranglehold over the market and force 1 in 4 people in the UK to chose between heating and eating.

- 2) Following the longest shut-down of a power station in UK history, the 21 arrested activists were sued by EDF for £5million – one of the largest if not The largest law suit to be brought against environmental activists in the UK. This was defeated within one month due to a massive social media campaign backed by heavyweight NGOs such as Greenpeace as well as a groundswell of popular support. Over 64,000 people signed a petition to stop EDF from proceeding with the case. The company came out as a corporate thug and bully and the attempt to deter future radical protests through suing them was thwarted. Following a campaign of intimidation by EDF, the company tried to engage No Dash for Gas in a 'Stakeholder Advisory Panel' to basically try and get us to tell them how to avoid and prevent future disruption to the company's interests. We publicly refused and ridiculed this suggestion and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) as a strategy overall. “First the ignore you, then they fight you, and then they invite you a Stakeholder Advisory Panel”..

### **Reclaim the Power**

Reclaim the Power was a 6 day action camp event which aimed to bring thousands back to West Burton in order to disrupt EDF again and show that direct action can be mass and participatory and not reliant on secrecy and crack team of a couple of dozen activists who can climb chimneys. A coalition of groups was invited to take part and co-organise the event: Disabled People Against Cuts, Greater London Pensioners Association, Occupy, UKUncut and Fuel Poverty Action.

The idea behind this coalition was:

- 1) **Speak to Austerity** : To bring together social, climate and economic justice groups together because the climate crisis is a symptom of a crisis of democracy and lack of peoples' power to decide our future and energy systems.
- 2) **Strength in diversity, unity and commonality – joining the dots** This coalition was necessary because it needed to reflect the diversity of social activism and movements in the UK. It wasn't a message about climate change that brought most people out onto the streets in the UK in recent years – it was an anti-capitalist one and it was Occupy. Austerity, cuts, debt, the destruction of the National Health Service and welfare state, the Bedroom Tax, corporate tax avoidance, workfare, fuel poverty (Bills have gone up by £300 in the last 3 years; 7000 people died last year because they could not keep warm enough) and the demonisation of/axing the Disability Living Allowance payment for disabled people are major issues in the UK today. Many organising Reclaim the Power felt that these realities

and the resistance to them needed to be expressed and to come together and work to win on a major policy issue happening under the cover of austerity shocks delivered by the government: this issue was our energy policy - which was being decided right now - and accelerated climate change.

- 3) **We need a win** - One week before the camp was due to descend back on a secret location in West Burton, we decided to switch the entire camp to Balcombe, in the deep south of the UK in Sussex. A recent Royal Geological Society report states the UK has twice as much shale gas as previously thought with 1.3k trillion cubic feet running between Nottingham and Blackpool. Fracking company Cuadrilla had a licence to drill in Balcombe and local opposition was running at over 85% to any drilling in the area. Fracking for shale oil and gas – but mainly gas - had become a national conversation, dominating the headlines. Up to 64% of the UK could have exploration licensing granted and fracking commencing over the next decade. Some 70,000 new jobs would be created and fuel prices could drop as they had done in the USA. Fracking would be the silver bullet to 'keeping the lights' on and UK energy security. The propaganda war was on.

Within hours of Reclaim the Power securing a site by squatting a field in the area, despite heavy police presence, Cuadrilla announced it would not drill for the entire duration of the RTP camp – 6 days. We had won and he hadn't even started. This win was based on 3 factors:

- **Historical power** based on having shut down a power station and beaten off EDF's lawsuit – could this be done again with serious losses to Cuadrilla's business?
- **An empowered culture of resistance** – RTP was based on the Climate Camp model of direct action, movement building and sustainable living. Direct action was the scariest element of the camp here and the fact that up to a thousand people would be planning civil disobedience. The camp itself was a form of direct action. It was amplifying and perpetuating a rich culture of resistance that had already succeeded in heading off the Third Runway at Heathrow and new coal.
- **Conflict Avoidance and neutralisation** – Public opinion was already starting to go our way, with many sympathising with the conservative village of Balcombe and seeing their plight as one of locals vs big business and government policy that is undemocratic. By neutralising the drilling, the company hoped to neutralise participation and bridge building between locals and the camp. If the aims of the camp had already been achieved – ie shut down Cuadrilla – then what was the point in travelling to Balcombe to protest? Our presence would be seen as 'unreasonable'.

## Coalition-Building

### Austerity UK – 2008 onwards

The UK climate action scene has gathered strength through the mass participatory events organised by activists under the umbrella of Climate Camp 2006-2011 involving thousands of 'new' people and building relationships of trust, solidarity and courage to take direct action.

Austerity attacks by the UK government saw many activists radicalised at Climate Camps create new groups which speak to peoples everyday struggles. Anti-cuts direct action group UK Uncut and climate and anti-austerity campaigners Fuel Poverty Action came out of Climate Camp for example. Relationships were built, by those two groups, with pensioners and disabled people, who'd been most affected by cuts and fuel poverty, in order to take action together and give one another mutual aid. These were Disabled People Against Cuts and the Greater London Pensioners Association, both of which have been at the forefront of public speak-outs and road blockades as well as participants

in the recent Reclaim the Power camp at Balcombe.

Links were built with these groups because they were already activists and had similar politics to ours – a spectrum of anarchist/libertarian/left – but were increasingly marginalised and impacted through government cuts. There was a need to support them and give solidarity to them but also, a consciousness of the need for our movement to 'talk to other people', not just to ourselves and to be more participatory and representative of the diversity of resistance to government austerity.

## **Local Groups**

The anti-fracking network 'Frack Off' began campaigning and taking direct action against the Fracking industry in the UK from 2011. It is a nation-wide network which provides advice, information and solidarity to local communities resisting fracking. There are 45 local anti-fracking groups all over the UK ready to oppose any attempts to frack in their localities. These range from a handful of people who have set up a facebook page or blog to wider networks. All in all, a common thread is that they have developed through social media. In Balcombe, many residents in the No Fracking in Balcombe Society (NoFIBS) group only knew each other through facebook.

Building trust and physical solidarity with local groups affected by new extractive industries can be a long and fraught process and as No Dash for Gas/Reclaim the Power, we had little time to really build solid relationships before we came to the village with our camp, however, 1) An action camp (The Balcombe Community Protection camp) had already been created at the gates of the Cuadrilla site by Frack Off and other groups and some of us stayed there and consulted with the camp 'leaders', building relationships 2) We wrote a letter and leaflet explaining our reasons for moving the camp to the site and inviting locals to a public meeting in the Parish Hall – convened by the No Fracking in Balcombe Society, and 3) We established a police and local council liaison officer (also a Farmer liaison when we took the site) to communicate with those most concerned about our presence 4) We made local democracy and the messaging of the local anti-fracking groups a key part of our own messaging when speaking to media.

At our public meeting before the camp we brought experienced campaigners from previous struggles involving activists 'coming into the community' and how successful this was, to address some of the fears locals had. These were activists from Residents Action on Fylde Fracking (Tina Louise, a Grandmother and also an Occupy activist), John Stewart from Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (HACAN) who had been involved in stopping the Third Runway at Heathrow, and the Save Friern Barnet Library campaign where squatters had occupied a library set for shut-down by the local council in order to give it back to the community. These were clear examples of the 'radical alternative left' or 'anarchists' working with local communities to support mutual aims and principles. Showing these examples gave confidence to the local communities also seeking external support for their struggles.

## **Coming with Power**

As mentioned above, one of the reasons we were able to have an impact was based on historical power or reputation which preceded us. The broad coalition of direct action groups including disabled and elderly activists was powerful and was intended to bring attention to a diversity of voices against fracking rooted in a democracy orientated message rather than just a climate change one. People are experiencing the impact of climate change in the UK through flooding and increased food prices but the more stark experience is that of a lack of democracy, disempowerment through neo-liberal restructuring of the UK and global economy for ever more de-regulation, dispossession and privatisation. Linking this dynamic to the same one which is wrecking the planet was an aim of Reclaim the Power which succeeded to a degree but also drew fire from climate

campaigners as not being clear enough on climate change, and 'trying to be all things to all people' and 'losing the climate message'.

Had the camp stayed at West Burton in Nottingham, it may well have less impact because it was not fused with a tangible, existing community struggle. A similar opportunity to hold a Climate Camp on the Isle of Wight in solidarity with Vestas wind turbine workers in occupation of their factory in 2010 was passed up in favour of targeting finance capital and Green Capitalism by the Camp taking place on Blackheath in London. Many people commented that for Balcombe, we made the right decision where for Vestas we had not, ie to support a community in struggle that has specifically appealed for help.

Empowerment of others creates more impact and power and inspiration For others. But to have that confidence in the first place, reputation and past victories – coming with power – to a community is a huge asset and boost to local campaigns. Power resides in **Institutions**: eg Greenpeace (wealth or research and direct action skills, a key player in the UK movement); Lush (enormously successful ethical toiletries company which has given money to Frack Off and other groups); Activist Tat Collective – grassroots crew providing the materials, tents, water pipes, infrastructure etc and know-how for physically making camp events happen; social housing co-operatives such as Radical Routes- these enable the reproduction and sustenance of cultures of mutual aid and solidarity; **Networks** – Earth First, the Climate Camp plus new incarnations of similar organising models and politics – UK Uncut, Occupy and Fuel Poverty Action; **Cultures resistance**: of direct action, mutual aid and solidarity, horizontal organising and anti-oppression politics, privilege consciousness.

### **3 Key Points about Coalition Building**

- this varies as to whether you are building coalitions with existing activist groups or new, community groups. The below are also informed by Union organising principles.
- **Listen - Responding to where people are in struggle** – anti-austerity/anti-capitalism, class solidarity, community solidarity. This can make a real difference. Activists can tend to want to set agendas, you can do this, but the issue has to be Live and tangible to people. Fracking and fuel poverty are key live issues in the UK now.
- **Widely felt and deeply felt - Big pressing issues** - Extractive industries – the possibility of a new extractive industry taking hold in the UK is real and happening now. The Dash for Gas is a turning point in UK energy policy. Heading it off and reclaiming democratic power for a publicly controlled energy system is a genuine fight on our hands and affects everybody. It's also winnable – it has not happened yet. Labour Party (opposition is seizing on the Fuel Poverty aspect now but not opposing fracking).
- **Come with Power – build on wins** – the themes of Reclaim the Power were explicitly about the power to affect change, to decide our futures, to reclaim democracy. The coalition had some experience in this already. Coming with power means creating moments, pressure points and alliances that bring power to a confrontation and conflict of interest on the side of a community or public that is Our Side. One of the results of the Reclaim the Power coalition camp was 1) Creating an empowering experience for a large number of people; through 2) building a new network of organisers and people cooperating together 3) stopping Cuadrilla 4) controvertialising Gas (recent [Polling by the University of Nottingham](#) has shown support for shale gas extraction in the UK steadily rising for more than a year, peaking at 61% in favour in July. But that number fell in September, to 55%) - this is directly attributed to anti-fracking protests in the Summer.