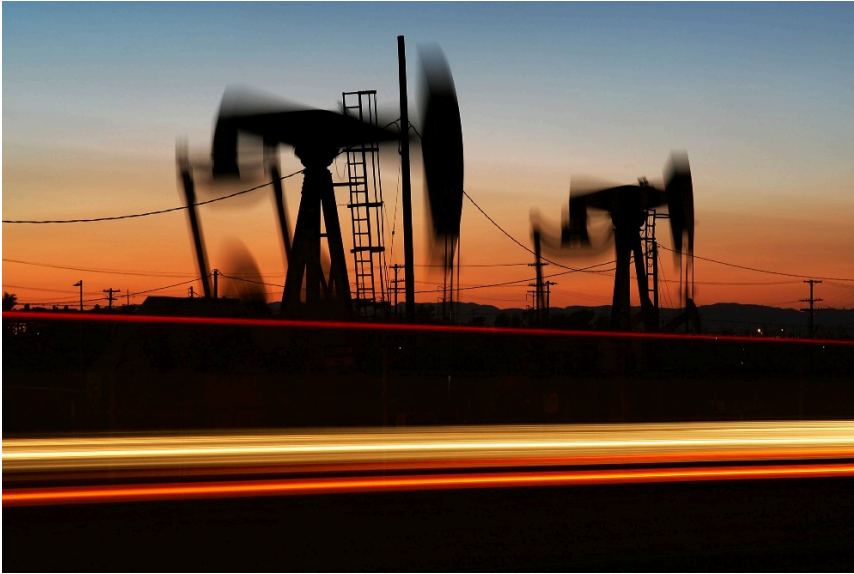# Want to Win on Climate? Put Justice at the Center

Communities of color are strong leaders in the fight against climate change, but only if policies and the process genuinely reflect their voice and vision.

By Laurie Mazur

In a season of grim climate news, California (once again) offers a ray of sunshine. In its 2016 legislative session, the state passed no fewer than six groundbreaking climate bills: setting historic targets for greenhouse gas reductions, helping disadvantaged communities build climate resilience, and more.

These bills can serve as models for progressive climate legislation at the state and federal levels. But the real story here—and the lesson for climate activists everywhere—is in how the bills came to pass.

As recently as last year, the prospects for new California climate laws seemed dim. Big Oil spent a record $22 million lobbying the California state legislature in 2015, and it paid off. A bill to set tough emissions reduction targets—SB-32, introduced by Senator Fran Pavley (Democrat-Agoura Hills)—was shot down in the Assembly by "moderate" Democrats with ties to fossil-fuel interests. Early in 2016, Governor Jerry Brown met with oil companies in closed-door talks, trying to craft a compromise bill that industry would accept.

That's when Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia (D-Coachella) stepped up to the plate. Garcia, who represents a predominantly low-income district, was in some ways an unlikely champion. "I don't consider myself a climate change activist," Garcia told the *Los Angeles Times* in September. "I consider myself an advocate for my community."

So, Garcia helped craft a climate bill (AB-197) that puts the interests of his community at the center. Drafted in consultation with the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA), and other grassroots groups, Garcia's bill will curb carbon emissions and air pollution in low-income communities of color—where the dirtiest factories, refineries, and power plants are located. This is important because some climate strategies—notably cap and trade—have actually *increased* pollution in those communities. The bill will also make the California Air Resources Board more transparent and accountable.

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Pavley and Garcia then teamed up to push the two bills forward as a package. This was crucial: by tying environmental justice issues to greenhouse gas reductions, the legislators were able to build a broad coalition of environmental groups, labor, and citizens from impacted communities. That enabled them to secure key votes from assembly members who had not supported the standalone emissions bill in 2015.

That success—and the coalition that made it happen—paved the way for other victories. The California State Legislature then went on to pass AB-1550, which increases the set-aside of climate investments going to vulnerable communities; and AB-2722, which creates the Transformative Climate Communities program, providing $140 million to fund planning and implementation of community-driven climate plans in disadvantaged areas.

There are important lessons to be learned from these victories. First, there's more to good climate policy than lowering emissions targets. "Not all climate policy is good policy," says Parin Shah, senior strategist at APEN. "In Richmond, California, the town's residents—low-income Asian immigrants and refugees—have endured pollution from the Chevron refinery for decades; and while the state's emissions have gone down, our members continue to breathe dirty air and live in fear of another refinery explosion."

"To grow the climate movement," Shah adds, "we must prioritize reducing pollution at the source. And, if we price carbon pollution, we must set an equitable price on it, one that takes in the full range of health and economic costs absorbed by cities and residents that live next to hotspots like Richmond. Assembly Member Garcia's leadership with AB-197 started us in this direction, and there is still more to do."

Second, these legislative victories spotlight a new political reality for climate policy. "To win on climate," says Strela Cervas, co-director of CEJA, "we've got to include the issues communities of color care about. We need climate solutions that work for the communities that have been or will be hit first and worst by climate change and related pollution."

What does that mean, exactly? According to Cervas, "It does not mean simply adding on some equity language, or using the potential benefits to communities of color as a talking point." Instead, it is the people who are most affected by pollution and climate change who must identify solutions and strategies. "We must be part of the decision-making process—not brought in at the end, but part of the strategy conversations from the first step," Cervas adds. Communities of color are strong leaders in the fight against climate change, but only if policies and the process genuinely reflects their voice and vision.

These lessons are clearly important in a majority-minority state like California. But they have resonance for climate activists everywhere. Too often, the environmental issues that communities of color care about are pushed to the side. Policymakers—and even advocates—think it is pragmatic to draft legislation in closed-door sessions, and support proposals that fail to tackle the health and quality of life issues of struggling communities. Those proposals, however, predictably fail to generate public support. By working with affected communities to address their real and immediate needs, it is possible to build broad, enthusiastic coalitions—and win.

"Together, we are stronger than Big Oil," Cervas says.

So, not selling out to corporate interests is the right thing to do, and it is also the strategic thing to do. That's a lesson that all lawmakers—including future presidents—should keep in mind.