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Why These Environmentalists Are Protesting Jerry Brown's Climate Summit

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The Global Climate Action Summit (GCAS), which kicked off in San Francisco Wednesday, marks a major ratcheting up of the local and state-level revolution against the Trump administration's backslide on climate action. The way Governor Jerry Brown—who launched the event—sees it, states like California don't need the president to save the planet. All they need is the allyship of other world leaders, businesses, and investors—like, um, Wall Street?

That's part of the issue more equity-focused and grassroots environmental and indigenous groups protesting the event have taken. These groups, which are united under the umbrella Solidarity to Solutions Week, argue that solving climate change is about more than market-based solutions. They wonder why Wall Street cats got an invite to the GCAS when many local groups never did.

“We have the solutions,” Darryl Molina Sarmiento, the executive director of California-based Communities for a Better Environment, told Earther. “We are the solutions for this climate crisis, so we're here to protest in front of the summit that's on display for climate capitalism, essentially a trade show. We want to lift up that communities are not for sale.”

The Solidarity to Solutions Week protestors are forcing attendees to recognize the reality of the state's ongoing dependence on oil and gas—California's rank may be slipping, but it's still sixth in the nation for oil and gas production. Tens of

thousands of new oil and gas permits have been issued on Brown's watch. And some of the "solutions" have been exactly the opposite for low income and communities of color. The state's cap-and-trade program has unintentionally lead to higher oil and gas development in largely Latinx communities like Wilmington, California, for example.

For Molina Sarmiento's group and others like it, solving climate change is about focusing on those underserved communities and what they need to thrive.

So far most of the protestors' events have been low-key, like local tours showing how oil and gas extraction impacts families, but they're finally revving it up for Day Two of the GCAS. Protestors are planning to illegally block the entrance to Brown's conference this morning, and they seem to have no qualms about getting arrested. That's kinda the point.

"Communities have asked that we put our bodies on the line as a response to the tremendous injustice that's going to be played out for the planet and people on the inside of the Global Climate Action Summit," said Angela Adrar, executive director of the Climate Justice Alliance, to Earther.

They don't want to be seen as disruptors, but as protectors for the sky and the water, Adrar told Earther. That's why Thursday's action is previewed with a prayerful ceremony and will feature theatre and a teach-in, too.

Most importantly, perhaps, these so-called water protectors want to tell the world that Brown is not the solution to the climate crisis.

The governor is championed around the country for his policies on solar and electric vehicles; for transforming California into a poster child for progressive climate action. Yet that image largely serves the state's white and wealthy population, activists argue. These groups feel Brown's policies don't encompass

California's growing immigrant population, or the communities of color that are deemed sacrifice zones: nearly 70 percent of the people who live near the state's oil and gas wells are non-white.

“Jerry Brown is not our climate leader,” Molina Sarmiento told Earther. “What we’re doing in California is not genuine climate leadership. We have been able to make a lot of advances, but the way in which he’s proposing these kinds of solutions is creating an increase in oil infrastructure locally.”

So California's pledge to go 100 percent renewable? Or its solar mandate on all new buildings? It's not enough for activists. Not until it keeps polluters out from the backyards of black and brown families.