

Chevron in Richmond:

Community-Based Strategies for Climate Justice

By Ellen Choy and Ana Orozco

As oil reserves dwindle across the planet, the oil industry is seeking to exploit energy-intensive, dirtier, ‘bottom-of-the-barrel’ crude oil, such as can be found in the Alberta Tar Sands of Canada and the Orinoco Belt in Venezuela. Rather than shifting to renewable energy and conservation, the industry is pushing to “retrofit” 33 existing refineries, construct five new ones, and build thousands of miles of new pipeline in the United States. The Chevron refinery in Richmond, California is one of the battlegrounds in this global struggle.

The 3,000-acre refinery, visible from the hills of San Francisco, has polluted the city of Richmond and the Bay Area for decades, despite being located in one of the centers of environmental activism.¹ Since 2006, Chevron has been in “high priority violation” of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) air compliance standards,² and in 2007, the EPA reported over 900,000 pounds of toxic waste from the refinery.³ And yet, Chevron has proposed a project to expand the Richmond refinery to process heavier, dirtier crude oil.

“Refineries are located in communities of color and low-income communities that have already been disproportionately impacted by a host of [toxic] industries,” says Denny Larson, a long-time refinery reform community organizer at Global Community Monitor. “These expansions could be the final nail in the coffin.”

Although the future of oil is in jeopardy, the industry seems determined to tap a heavy oil and tar sands resource that could last hundreds of years.^{4,5} This would create another wave of environmental injustice; this time culminating in catastrophic climate change. To reverse this trend, “we need a paradigm shift that empowers sophisticated, multi-pronged strategies of litigation, direct action, and advocacy,” asserts Clayton Thomas-Muller of the Indigenous Environmental Network’s Tar Sands Campaign.

But first, there has to be a commitment at both the local and national levels, “To a sustained dialogue,

and recognition that these communities need jobs—they need green jobs,” says Larson. Richmond provides a good case study of just how such an approach can unite communities in the effort to reduce local and global impacts of the fossil fuel economy.

The Richmond Campaign

Richmond is home to over 100,000 people, approximately 82 percent of whom are listed as minorities by the United States Census. Seventeen thousand people live within just three miles of the [Chevron] refinery—some of them in the two housing projects located there. The majority are low-income people of color.

Last summer, Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) conducted a health survey of 440 adults and 282 children from Richmond and found that 46 percent of the adults and 17 percent of the children surveyed suffer from asthma.⁶ The longer a person lived in Richmond, the greater the likelihood that they would suffer from asthma.⁷ Local community organizations, as well as individuals, have come to recognize the link between the community’s health problems and the high level of pollution in the area. In March, 2008 a coalition of groups shut down the front entrance to Chevron’s Richmond refinery; 24 were arrested. Also, since 2007, protests have been held at every annual shareholder meeting at Chevron’s headquarters in San Ramon against injustices committed in communities around the world.



In September 2008, CBE, West County Toxics Coalition, and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) brought a lawsuit against Chevron and the City of Richmond to stop the refinery's expansion project, which was in violation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Chevron's Environmental Impact Report (EIR) to the city was not comprehensive enough to disclose that the expansion would enable the refining of heavier and more contaminated oil. Yet, the City of Richmond granted permits for this project, despite the consequences and the community's "right to know."

According to CBE's head scientist Greg Karras, "Mercury, selenium, arsenic, corrosive acids, nickel, nitrogen, sulfur, vanadium and/or other pollutants can be drastically higher [with the refinement of heavier, dirtier oil]." Karras also points out that to refine heavier, dirtier crude, the refinery will have to burn more fossil fuels to generate the extra energy needed for the process. This is in direct contradiction to Chevron's claims that the intention of the project is to modernize and renew the refinery in order to lower emissions.

The case was brought before Judge Zuniga of the Superior Court of Contra Costa County, who ruled in favor of the environmental justice organizations and Richmond residents. Then, in November 2008, the voters of Richmond passed ballot Measure T, "A fair share for Richmond," which would increase the business license fee for large

manufacturers based on the value of their raw materials. Measure T would generate at least \$16 million per year (or more, based on profits) for the City of Richmond, from Chevron. Richmond resident Rev. Kenneth Davis says that "this money could be used to generate Green Jobs and more in the community. Chevron brags that they give \$61 million dollars to the community of Richmond through grants to different Richmond non-profits. Measure T, over the years would generate much more money for Richmond, and this would be money for the city to determine how to use, free of Chevron's restrictions and guidelines."

Chevron is appealing the Superior Court's decision and has tied up the new fee in other litigation. The company is also trying to drive a wedge between environmental justice and community groups and some very important labor groups by claiming that many jobs were lost because of the halt on the expansion project. Of course, if Chevron had the will, it could start working on actually upgrading and improving the refinery in order to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, thus creating new green jobs for Richmond residents. Or at the least, it could sign an agreement not to bring in heavier, dirtier oil for refinement.

Dr. Henry Clark, executive director of the West County Toxics Coalition, says "Greenhouse Gangsters like Chevron need to stop polluting our communities, and respect the human rights of resi-



dents that are being bombarded by toxic chemicals, greenhouse gas, flaring, fires, and explosions.”

Clark says that his organization will take a delegation to the climate talks in Copenhagen, Denmark “to ensure that Chevron and associates voices are not the only voices heard. We will help put a face on who’s on the frontline of the climate change effects.”

Real Power vs. Grassroots Power

The campaign against the refinery expansion in Richmond is a notable grassroots victory, which has used organizing, direct action, a ballot referendum, public research, and legal action to protect the community and reign in the company. But Richmond is also a dire reminder of the unjust power dynamics of many fenceline communities.

The Obama administration has not proved supportive of efforts to fight oil dominance. Last August, the State Department approved the construction of major pipelines from the Alberta Tar Sands to refineries in the United States. Obama has also gained notoriety amongst the environmental justice community for actively endorsing market-based solutions and a stringent advocacy of clean coal technology.

“We have to understand the complex political and economic overlays between U.S. energy security and the reliance that America has on Canada’s resource extraction-based economy,” cautions Thomas-Muller. “They are inextricably linked. Even under Obama’s platform of sustainability, of promoting the notion of

green jobs, we know that a lot is probably rhetoric.”

Meanwhile, a global oil switch threatens to lock in worst-case future climate impacts. Processing dirtier oil has already increased greenhouse gas emissions from some refineries by more than 50 percent, and a full-blown switch to heavy oil and tar sands could double or triple the GHG emissions from making each gallon of gasoline.^{8,9}

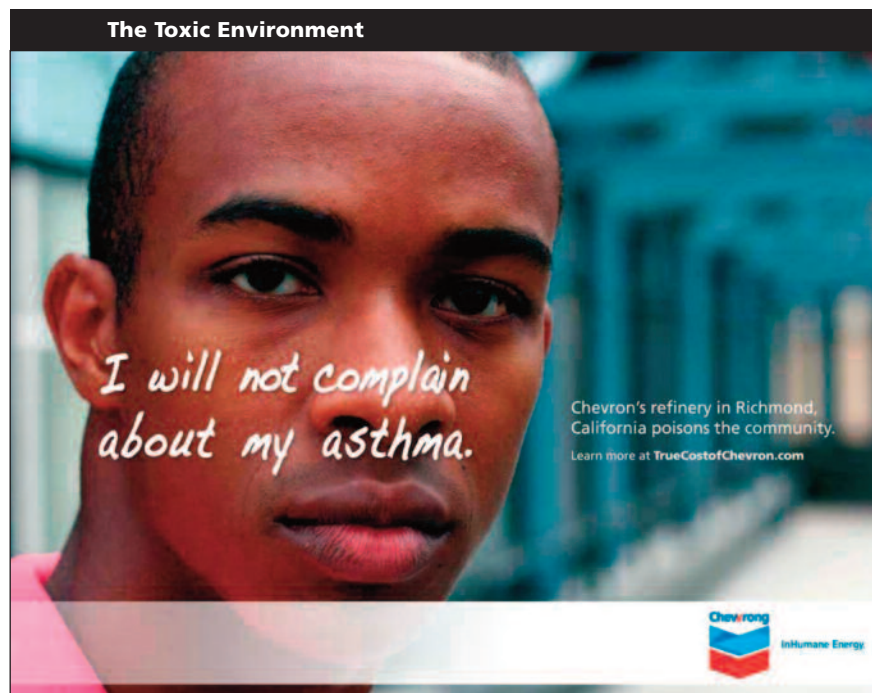
Refinery towns, like other oil-affected communities, are classic battlegrounds for corporate control and environmental justice. The Richmond activists’ legal victory and the ongoing struggle to create a just transition that benefits workers and community by reducing refinery pollution and catastrophic risk is being closely watched by other refinery towns in California, Delaware, Indiana, and Michigan. A huge challenge for organizers opposing fossil fuel dominance in these communities is the fact that just about every political, economic, and social sector has a stake—from labor and housing organizers to environmentalists and public health departments.

“What we’re left with is business as usual in a top-to-bottom approach that isn’t working [and] hasn’t for 20 years,” laments Thomas-Muller. “We’re left with the need for profound social movements from all sectors, including labor, to come together in a justice-based framework to converge people power.”

Community-based networks, such as the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative, of which the Indigenous Environmental Network is an

Photo:
Chevron Refinery in Richmond.

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active member, have been organizing low-income communities of color around coal and oil battlegrounds and translating it to community-based policy advocacy through their unique framing of climate change issues. But ultimately, points out Thomas-Muller, “Economics will determine the future of the 33 refineries, and of the tar sands, because money ultimately equals political power. As activists we face the stark reality that we have to stop that flow of money to the pockets of investors. We have to make [oil] an unattractive investment, and [instead] make it attractive to invest in this \$30 billion new energy economy.”

Creating Hope through Solidarity

The Mobilization for Climate Justice, a newly-formed national grassroots coalition, recently staged a mass public action against the Chevron refinery in solidarity with Richmond-based organizations, demonstrating how diverse social organizations can link arms within this increasingly strategic framework of climate and energy.

At the rally, Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, who opposed the refinery expansion and supported the manufacturer fee, had this to say: “In Richmond, we want nothing short of fairness from this major oil company. [Chevron] made 24 billion dollars in profit last year, while Richmond residents struggle to support their families. There has been a widening economic gap throughout our nation. Richmond, with this mega-billion dollar corporation, is a clear-cut example of this injustice.”¹⁰

Clayton Thomas-Muller argues that social movements to fight the fossil fuel regime should still be at a greater and louder capacity, as these industries include some of the richest and most powerful entities in the world. “We, in the EJ movement, have a profound responsibility to bring fires across the continent and link them together... Change is happening, but we don’t have the organization and the financing to say that there’s a movement. We need to get a lot more sophisticated and cause fundamental shift in where power sits in U.S. and Canadian social movements. We need to escalate things to a whole new level.” ■

Endnotes

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Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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(Inside Front) Richmond refinery. ©2008 Scott Braley. (Inside Back) Urban garden in Havana Cuba. © John and Faith Morgan / www.powerofcommunity.com.

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