The Climatic Consequences of Coal: Nebraska’s Role

Coal Protest in Omaha June 17

Internationally renowned global warming activist and writer Bill McKibben will lead a protest over the use of coal energy Thursday morning June 17 in downtown Omaha. The 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon protest will be held in front of the Union Pacific’s corporate headquarters at 14th and Douglas Streets to spotlight Nebraska’s leading role in the transport of this dirty and deadly energy.

Author of the first book to address the global warming threat, *The End of Nature* (1989), McKibben has been sounding the alarm about fossil fuels and carbon emissions for over two decades. He is the founder of 350.org, the global campaign to cap carbon dioxide particles in the atmosphere at 350 parts per million. The 350.org website features a host of internationally acclaimed “350 Messengers” warning of the harrowing spike in greenhouse gas emissions, including NASA climatologist James Hansen, U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change chair Rajendra Pachauri (who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore) and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The lawful peaceful protest at the U.P. headquarters, which is jointly sponsored by Nebraskans for Peace, the Missouri Valley Group of the Nebraska Sierra Club, the Nebraska Green Party, Physicians for Social Responsibility and 350.org, is timed to coincide with the upcoming Senate climate debate over taxing fossil fuels.

Plan now on participating in this critically important Nebraska effort to focus more national attention on the dangers of coal. As UNO Professor Bruce Johansen notes in the adjacent article, coal is the linchpin of global warming, exacerbating climate change and (according to the Pentagon’s 2010 “Quadrennial Defense Review”) international instability and conflict. The more the climate warms, the more war there will be. Preserving this fragile ecosystem in which we make our home goes to the very heart of peace-making. If we are ever to have ‘Peace on Earth,’ we must—in Al Gore’s words—stop “waging war on the planet.”

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by Bruce E. Johansen

Why coal? Why here? Why now?

As the dirtiest and most pervasive fossil fuel, coal is the linchpin of global warming. Continuing to burn coal to generate electricity all but guarantees we will face catastrophic changes in our climate. Nebraska has no coal resources of its own. But our role as a transportation corridor from the strip mines of Wyoming’s Powder River Basin has made our state the nexus for coal trafficking in North America—putting us on the frontline of the battle over a new national energy policy.

Omaha has served as the headquarters of the nation’s largest railroad, the Union Pacific, since its founding. With Warren Buffett’s recent purchase of the Burlington Northern/Santa Fe (the second-largest railroad in the country), however, this Nebraska city has now become the financial center for America’s railway industry. Both the U.P. and the BNSF earn about 20 percent of their freight revenues from hauling coal.

by Bill McKibben

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Nebraskans for Peace
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On Kris Kobach & His Bosses

by Heidi Beirich

Kris Kobach has become synonymous with the issue of illegal immigration.

An attorney and law professor, he has promoted harsh laws targeting undocumented immigrants in communities across the country. They may be deeply flawed. They may even spark expensive legal challenges for the cities and towns enforcing them. Yet Kobach is undeterred.

Here in Nebraska, he’s in the midst of efforts that could ultimately require renters in Fremont to prove their citizenship before they rent an apartment. He also filed a lawsuit challenging a Nebraska law that allows undocumented students to pay in-state college tuition.

This information is well known. But what few people may know is the background of Kobach’s employer.

Kobach is the Immigration Reform Law Institute’s national expert on constitutional law. It is the legal arm of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which is listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).

The SPLC does not casually designate organizations as hate groups. The fact is that FAIR has a 20-year track record of bigotry and extremism that should raise questions about its motives. It has accepted $1.2 million from the Pioneer Fund, a racist foundation devoted to eugenics and to proving a connection between race and intelligence.

FAIR’s founder, John Tanton, also has a long personal history of associating with white nationalists. In a 1993 letter to Garret Hardin, a committed eugenicist who promoted pseudo-scientific ideas of racial purity, Tanton wrote: “I’ve come to the point of view that for European-American society and culture to persist requires an European-American majority, and a clear one at that.”

Tanton also operates the Social Contract Press, listed as a hate group for many years by the SPLC because of its anti-Latino and white supremacist writings.

FAIR has board members who write regularly for hate publications. And the organization has promoted racially charged conspiracy theories such as the belief that Mexico is plotting to re-conquer the Southwest.

Regardless of one’s position on immigration reform, organizations with FAIR’s track record have no place at the table when immigration policy is discussed and formulated.

This is why the SPLC and the Center for New Community sent a letter describing FAIR’s history to the House Judiciary Committee last year when Kobach testified at the committee’s hearing on immigration law enforcement.

This nation deserves an open and honest discussion about immigration policy. But we must be vigilant when it comes to the groups shaping this debate. The debate should not be poisoned by a group manipulating the issue for its own despicable goals.

Kobach may attempt to distance himself from FAIR’s history as he peddles illegal immigration remedies from town to town. He may even claim that we don’t know what is in his heart.

But we certainly know who is signing his paycheck.

Heidi Beirich, Ph.D. is director of research for the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization that monitors extremist activity across the country.
Climatic Consequences of Coal: Nebraska’s Role, continued

coal, giving them a direct financial stake in policy discussions in Washington.

Union Pacific and Climate Change

Not surprisingly, the U.P. has been no fan of climate change legislation. The company itself spent $3 million on lobbying through the first eight months of 2009—the bulk of it opposing the Waxman-Markey “American Clean Energy and Security Act” passed by the House of Representatives last summer. But the U.P.’s national influence runs far deeper.

Tom Donohue, the national president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (which has adamantly opposed legislation to curb global warming), is a member of U.P.’s Board of Directors. The U.P. has paid more than $1 million in retainers to Donohue, a board member since 1998. He also has been granted more than 43,000 shares of Union Pacific stock, and is entitled to nearly 20,000 more shares when he leaves the U.P. board—a combined value about $3.8 million at today’s share prices.

The U.P. has also given $700,000 to the U.S. Chamber since 2004, including $500,000 to the Chamber’s “Leadership Fund” (a common name for its political action committees), plus $100,000 to a voter-education project in 2006, and $100,000 to an award ceremony in 2007.

“What is the connection between Union Pacific Railroad, dirty coal and the U.S. Chamber?” Pete Altman of the “Natural Resources Defense Council” asked in a blog last fall. “The dots connecting them draw what has the appearance of a conflict of interest.”

So What’s the Matter with Coal?

Nebraska is the only state in the U.S. with a 100-percent public power system. One might think of that as progressive, but it’s been ‘business-as-usual’ when it comes to energy use—which means burning lots of coal. Alternative power here has lagged seriously behind the rest of the country. In Omaha, two-thirds of Omaha Public Power District’s generation comes from coal (nearly all of the rest is nuclear).

OPPD’s and the Nebraska Public Power District’s current goals call for wind energy making up no more than ten percent of their total portfolio by 2020, despite a recent poll (funded in part by the “Center for Rural Affairs”) in which 79 percent of respondents urge 20 percent or more. Iowa’s private power utilities, in comparison, are doing far better. Nebraska’s Public Power Districts have obviously been wooed not only by the fact that Wyoming coal is deceptively ‘cheap,’ but plentiful.

Ninety percent of the Earth’s remaining fossil-fuel reserves, in fact, are in the form of coal. For nations with large popula-

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form into a greenhouse gas (100 to 200 years in the oceans)—we may be well on the way to replicating the conditions of the Pliocene. This should be cause for concern among the 1 billion people on Earth who live within 100 feet of sea level.

‘Thermal inertia’ is central to global warming. In general terms, it involves the amount of time required for an action that provokes warmth (such as carbon-dioxide emissions) to reach a given temperature in the atmosphere and oceans. For example, a frozen turkey placed in an oven at 350 degrees F. does not cook instantly. It takes a while for the temperature of the thawing turkey to reach equilibrium with that of the oven. In the same sense, a large body of cold water is more ‘thermally inert’ than the warmer atmosphere above it. This heat exchange works both directions. Even after

railroads profit from climate destruction

stop coal in its tracks
A Nuclear Weapon-Free World

by Dan Schlitt

Dan Schlitt is a retired UNL physics professor who has followed issues related to nuclear weapons for 50 years. A founding member of Nebraskans for Peace and active Quaker, he currently sits on the “General Committee of the Friends Committee on National Legislation” and recently served on the Regional Executive Committee and the national Board of the American Friends Service Committee.

The past several months have been very encouraging for those of us who yearn for the end of the threat from nuclear weapons. For three decades we have seen little progress. The current steps are not all we could wish for, but they are steps in the right direction.

What are these encouraging things? They can be placed in four groups. Each has many details.

Some are primarily talk. The April 2009 speech in Prague by President Obama contained an encouraging message. The “Nuclear Posture Review” presented in April of this year contains good elements although it did not include some important things. The administration’s public announcement of the size of the U.S.’s nuclear arsenal removed the secrecy surrounding a critical piece of information, providing greater transparency as we move slowly toward zero nuclear weapons in the world.

There is in fact a new breath of international cooperation. A “New START” treaty has been negotiated with Russia. The President initiated a large international gathering of national leaders to discuss the securing of all nuclear materials. That was followed quickly by the meeting held every fifth year to reevaluate and extend the “Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.” We have yet to see the consequences of these activities.

Our Congress too must act. Treaties may be signed by the president, but they must still be ratified by the Senate. The first big step on this road is the ratification of the New START treaty. There will be hearings followed by careful vote counting and courting. Sixty-seven votes are needed to put this treaty into effect, which is an essential step toward the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. If the START treaty is approved, there will then be a second effort to ratify the “Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty” (CTBT), which has been waiting since 1996 for U.S. ratification. It’s essential that both the House and the Senate provide support for some activities. They must support those forward-moving steps outlined in the Nuclear Posture Review in the budget appropriations for the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy. The international securing of nuclear materials, for example, will require congressional support in various ways, including the extension and funding of the “Nunn-Lugar program” for securing and dismantling weapons of the old Soviet Union.

The Prague speech sets out a clear goal.

So today, I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. I’m not naïve. This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. We have to insist, “Yes, we can.”

Now, let me describe to you the trajectory we need to be on. First, the United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons. To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same. Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies—including the Czech Republic. But we will begin the work of reducing our arsenal.

The first big step on the road to a nuclear weapon-free world is ratification of the ‘New START’ treaty. There will be hearings followed by careful vote counting and courting. Sixty-seven Senate votes are needed to put this treaty into effect.

The test of these goals is how actions support these words about a world without nuclear weapons.

The Nuclear Posture Review is a policy document. It sets out five key objectives:

1. Preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism;
2. Reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy;
3. Maintaining strategic deterrence and stability at reduced force levels;
4. Strengthening regional deterrence and reassuring U.S. allies and partners; and
5. Sustaining a safe, secure, and efficient arsenal.

The first two objectives have the potential to move us forward. Like any policy, much will depend on the implementation. The policy gives no details about how we will go about preventing proliferation in the case of Iran.

The last three objectives have the potential for continuing on much as we have been. They contain a policy of extending the life of our current nuclear arsenal. On the positive side the new, but hedged, policy is to not respond or threaten to respond to a chemical or biological attack with nuclear weapons. On the disappointing side is the absence of a policy prohibiting a nuclear first strike.

We will need to be watchful as these policies are put into effect. Our efforts will be required to make sure we actually move toward zero nuclear weapons and a more peaceful world.

Treaty Ratification

Central to this new nuclear policy is the ratification of the New START treaty. The initial Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) was negotiated by President Reagan and went into effect in 1991. The treaty expired on December 5, 2009. It placed limits on delivery vehicles and warheads which required reductions in the arsenals of both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. It provided an extensive system of intrusive verification.

There should not be any problems in ratifying the new treaty. It is basically an extension of the treaty that has been in effect since 1991 with reduced limits on the numbers of weapons and strengthening of
Blowback
Why They Try to Bomb Us

U.S. Strategic Command is a principal combatant in the robotic air war being waged over Afghanistan and Pakistan. From two miles up at a height invisible from the ground, StratCom-operated drones are targeting and assassinating suspected militants without their even knowing what hit them. In and of itself, this Obama Administration policy of ‘targeted assassination’ and ‘killing without warning’ is undoubtedly running afoul of international law.

But this past May, it was disclosed that the White House has actually expanded this vigilante policy to include targets who cannot even be identified by name. Utilizing what CIA and StratCom officials describe as ‘pattern of life’ analysis, drone robots are regularly killing people whose identities are not even known. Apart from shredding our purported commitment to democracy and due process, this policy is certain to result in the indiscriminate deaths of innocent civilians.

The following article by David Sirota, posted May 14, 2010 on Truthdig.com, attempts to give Americans a sense of how Afghan and Pakistani citizens must feel about this deadly and ethically unconscionable policy now being employed by a Democratic administration.

Imagine, if you can, an alternate universe.

Imagine that in this alternate universe, a foreign military power begins flying remote-controlled warplanes over your town, using onboard missiles to kill hundreds of your innocent neighbors.

Now imagine that when you read the newspaper about this ongoing bloodbath, you learn that the foreign nation’s top general is nonchalantly telling reporters that his troops are also killing “an amazing number” of your cultural brethren in an adjacent country. Imagine further learning that this foreign power is expanding the drone attacks on your community despite the attacks’ well-known record of killing innocents. And finally, imagine that when you turn on your television, you see the perpetrator nation’s tuxedo-clad leader cracking stand-up comedy jokes about drone strikes that prompt guffaws from an audience of that nation’s elite.

Ask yourself: How would you and your fellow citizens respond? Would you call homegrown militias mounting a defense ‘patriots’ or would you call them ‘terrorists’? Would you agree with your leaders when they angrily tell reporters that violent defiance should be expected?

Fortunately, most Americans don’t have to worry about these queries in their own lives. But how we answer them in a hypothetical thought experiment provides us insight into how Pakistanis are likely to be feeling right now. Why? Because thanks to our continued drone assaults on their country, Pakistanis now confront these issues every day. And if they answer these questions as many of us undoubtedly would in a similar situation—well, that should trouble every American in this age of asymmetrical warfare.

Though we don’t like to call it mass murder, the U.S. government’s undeclared drone war in Pakistan is devolving into just that. As noted by a former counterinsurgency adviser to General David Petraeus and a former Army officer in Afghanistan, the operation has become a haphazard massacre.

“Press reports suggest that over the last three years drone strikes have killed about 14 terrorist leaders,” David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum wrote in 2009. “But, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700 civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed.”

Making matters worse, General Stanley McChrystal has, indeed, told journalists that in Afghanistan, U.S. troops have “shot an amazing number of people” and “none has proven to have been a real threat.” Meanwhile, President Barack Obama used his internationally televised speech at the White House Correspondents Dinner to jest about drone warfare—and the assembled Washington glitterati did, in fact, reward him with approving laughs.

By eerie coincidence, that latter display of monstrous insouciance occurred on the same night as the failed effort to raze Times Square. Though America reacted to that despicable terrorism attempt with its routine spasms of cartoonish shock (why do they hate us?!), the assailant’s motive was anything but baffling. As law enforcement officials soon reported, the accused bomber was probably trained and inspired by Pakistani groups seeking revenge for U.S. drone strikes.

“This is a blowback,” said Pakistan’s foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi. “This is a reaction. And you could expect that... let’s not be naive.”

Obviously, regardless of rationale, a “reaction” that involves trying to incinerate civilians in Manhattan is abhorrent and unacceptable. But so is Obama’s move to intensify drone assaults that we know are regularly incinerating innocent civilians in Pakistan. And while Qureshi’s statement about “expecting” blowback seems radical, he’s merely echoing the CIA’s reminder that “possibilities of blowback” arise when we conduct martial operations abroad.

We might remember that somehow-forgotten warning come the next terrorist assault. No matter how surprised we may feel after that inevitable (and inevitably deplorable) attack, the fact remains that until we halt our own indiscriminately violent actions, we ought to expect equally indiscriminate and equally violent reactions.

David Sirota is a bestselling author whose newest book is The Uprising. He is a fellow at the “Campaign for America’s Future” and a board member of the “Progressive States Network”—both nonpartisan organizations. Sirota was once U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders’ spokesperson. His blog is at www.credoaction.com/sirota.
BILL McKIBBEN on Democracy Now! hosts Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez interviewed global warming author and activist Bill McKibben about his newly published book on April 15, the week before Earth Day.

AMY GOODMAN: Today we’re joined by someone who sounded one of the earliest alarms about global warming. Twenty years ago, environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote The End of Nature, but his warnings went largely unheeded. Now, as people are grappling with the unavoidable effects of climate change and confronting an earth that’s suddenly melting, drying, acidifying, flooding and burning in unprecedented ways, Bill McKibben is out with a new book about what we have to do to survive this brave new world.

Today, he says, global warming is no longer simply a threat. It’s a reality. And the planet is so fundamentally different as a result, might as well call it “Eaarth.” Well, that’s the title of his latest book: Eaarth—E-a-a-r-t-h—Making a Life on a Tough New Planet. Author, activist and founder of 350.org, Bill McKibben joins us now from Washington, D.C., as he whirls around the planet.

Bill, E-a-a-r-t-h? Why?

BILL McKIBBEN: The planet that we live on now is different, and in fundamental ways, from the one that we were born onto. The atmosphere holds about five percent more water vapor than it did 40 years ago. That’s an incredible change in one of the basic physical parameters of the planet, and it explains all those deluges and downpours. The ocean is 30 percent more acidic, as it absorbs all that carbon from the atmosphere. NASA said yesterday that we’ve just come through the warmest January, February, March on record, that 2010 is going to be the warmest year that we’ve ever seen.

And we begin to see every day in the newspaper the practical effects of all this. Last week it was Rio de Janeiro with absolutely record rainfalls, causing landslides that killed thousands. Today, in the run-up to the ‘people’s’ international summit on climate change scheduled to start next week in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in Peru, an enormous chunk of glacier fell off a mountainside into a lake, set up a 75-foot-high wave that killed some people and destroyed the one water processing plant in the whole area. These sort of things happen now someplace around the world every single day, because we’ve undermined the basic physical stability of this planet.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And Bill, in terms of your proposals for solutions, you—in your book, you don’t focus so much on governmental or top-down solutions. What are some of the key ingredients of how the world’s population can reverse this trend?

BILL McKIBBEN: Well, reversing the trend is hard—impossible, in fact. We’re not going to stop global warming. We can keep it from getting worse than it has to get. For that to happen, Juan, we need things to happen at two levels. One is the governmental, national and global. We need a stiff price on carbon, one that reflects the damage it does in the atmosphere, that will reorient our economy in the direction of renewable energy instead of fossil fuel. But we’re also going to need, because we have a new planet, a new set of habits for inhabiting it successfully.

Our fundamental habitat for the last couple of hundred years has been to assume that growth is going to solve every problem that we face. I think now we’ve fundamentally reached the limits to growth that people started talking about 50 years ago. When you melt the Arctic, that’s not a good sign. So we’re going to need, instead, to start focusing on security, on stability, on resilience, on figuring out how to allow communities to thrive, even on a tough planet. And I think that that has a lot to do with decentralization, with scaling down, with spreading out, with building food systems and energy systems that aren’t too big to fail, that are small enough and stable enough to succeed.

AMY GOODMAN: …Talk about 350.org, your organization. As we lead into Bolivia, Democracy Now! is already headed down to Cochabamba. We’ll be broadcasting from there Monday through Friday, right through Earth Day. Fifteen thousand people, particularly from around Latin America, but from around the world are expected. It’s not as if this is going to change policy, as Copenhagen would have if it succeeded, but it’s about people going back a step and saying, well, then it’s going to come from grassroots movements. 350.org certainly was an emblem of that. Talk about the actions around the world that are being taken now, Bill.

BILL McKIBBEN: Absolutely. Amy, you’ve got it exactly right. We’re going to have to build a movement to put political pressure on to finally get some change out of this system. We haven’t done it in the past well enough. And that failure of Copenhagen was symbol of that.

At 350.org, we’ll have a bunch of folks in Cochabamba, and they’ll be spreading the word, telling people what happened last year with 350.org, when we pulled off the largest—what did CNN say?—the most widespread day of political action in the planet’s history: 5,200 separate actions in 181 countries on a single day in October.

This year, on October 10, we’re organizing what we’re calling a global work party. There will be thousands upon thousands of communities around the world where people will be putting up solar panels or digging community gardens, not because we think that we’re going to solve this problem one project at a time—we are not—but because we want to send a message finally to our leaders: get to work. If we can do it, if we can climb up on the roof of the school and hammer in a solar panel, you can climb up on the floor of the Senate and hammer out some real legislation, not the kind of watered-down stuff that we’re likely to see next week that is—I’m afraid, falls deeply into the category of ‘too little, too late.’

AMY GOODMAN: And when you say next week, you mean Earth Day around the world?

BILL McKIBBEN: Kerry and Graham and Lieberman are supposed to introduce a bill in the U.S. Senate this coming week. And though we haven’t seen it yet, and it’s too early to definitively describe...
it, it looks like an incredible accumulation of gifts to all the energy industries, in the hopes that they won’t provide too much opposition to what’s a very weak greenhouse gas pact.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Bill, I’d like to ask you to talk a little about the impact of climate change, especially on the developing world, and specifically in terms of the massive migrations of peoples. Obviously, throughout Latin America and Africa, more and more people are leaving the land, [building up huge populations in metropolises] that then have to be fed from the countryside… [Talk about] the impact of the drying up of some lands that’s forcing these mass migrations. Northern Mexico for instance, increasingly arid, and more and more the peasants of northern Mexico are leaving and moving and trying to get into the United States.

BILL MCKIBBEN: Yep. Look, the world looks the way it looks because we’ve had 10,000 years of climatic stability. That’s why we built our cities where we did, and so on and so forth. As that changes, there are going to be enormous consequences, and we’re already seeing them. And they’re painful in every corner of the world. The Indians are building a 2,000-mile-long wall around the border with Bangladesh, because they know what kind of flood of people will be coming from that direction.

And the horrible part is, of course, that the countries hit hardest and first are the ones that have done the least to cause this problem and the countries that are most unfairly going to have to change their economic development plans the most over the next decades. The easiest way for India or China or almost anybody else to pull people out of poverty would be to burn more of the cheap coal that they have on hand. But they can’t do it, because the West has filled up the atmosphere already.

The global inequity, that’s always been a sin, has become a great practical impediment to action on this. And if we can’t somehow square that circle, if we can’t figure out how to transfer some serious resources north to south in the form of technology to allow countries to develop without going through the fossil fuel age, then we have little to no chance of preventing the absolute worst outcomes.

AMY GOODMAN: And Bill McKibben, the question in this country is always, why would you be sending money south?

BILL MCKIBBEN: Well, we’re going to have to—I mean, the trouble is that what we’re dealing with, Amy, is not a debate between China and the U.S. or between Republicans and Democrats, fundamentally; it’s a debate between human beings and physics and chemistry. And physics and chemistry don’t suspend their operations just because we’re in an economic rough patch. We’ve got to get our carbon emissions down, and fast, and we’ve got to help the rest of the world do the same thing. If we can’t, then we’re in far greater trouble than any recession we’re experiencing now.

JUAN GONZALEZ: What about the direction of the Obama Administration, saying that as part of the clean energy solution, the United States must begin building nuclear plants once again, and then presumably other countries in the world should do, as well?

BILL MCKIBBEN: Well, first of all, let’s give credit where it’s due. The Obama Administration has done more in its year and a half in office on climate change than all the other presidents of the global warming era combined. On the other hand, you know, I’ve drunk more beer than my twelve-year-old niece, [so] the bar was set pretty low. And the actions that we’ve seen so far have been around the edges.

Now that we’re beginning to get—head toward some serious negotiation in the Senate, the Obama Administration is giving away an awful lot: offshore drilling, lots of support for nuclear power. Nuclear power doesn’t give off much carbon. That’s the best thing you can say about it. The worst thing you can say about it, at least aside from nuclear waste and plutonium and terrorism, the worst thing you can say about it is it wastes an incredible amount of money. It will only happen with massive, massive government subsidy. And if we’re going to subsidize something, there are a lot of technologies that offer a lot more kilowatt hours for the buck than trying to build giant nuclear power stations.

AMY GOODMAN: Bill McKibben, we’re in the wake now of this terrible mine disaster, the worst in, what, 40 years, 29 miners dead. All through the 2008 Democratic Convention, as we were in Denver, we saw those signs for clean coal. What about coal as an answer?

BILL MCKIBBEN: Coal is the most dangerous substance on the planet, in almost every way—I mean, for the people who have to mine it and for the landscapes where it exists, like across southern Appalachia, for the people who have to breathe the smoke around power plants, mostly in our inner cities, but most fundamentally for the climate. Coal produces more carbon per BTU than anything else you can burn. And as a result, more than anything, it’s what’s driving our climate problem.

We’re not going to have, in the time that we require it, anything that really resembles clean coal. What we need to do is make that transition away from coal, and make it as fast as we can. Job one is putting a really significant price on carbon, so that coal begins to pay for some of the incredible damage that it does to the environment.

AMY GOODMAN: As we wrap up—your organization, 350.org—explain it one more time.

BILL MCKIBBEN: Three-fifty is the most important number in the world. NASA scientists have said that any value for carbon in the atmosphere greater than 350 parts per million is not compatible with the planet on which civilization developed and to which life on earth has adapted. That’s strong language, and it’s stronger still, because we’re past it already. We’re at 390 parts per million or so today and rising about two parts per million a year. That’s why the Arctic is melting. It’s why the oceans are acidifying. And it’s why we need a movement around the world to force political action sooner rather than later. We’re running out of time.
Rising Carbon-Dioxide Levels Acidify the Oceans

Carbon dioxide does more than retain heat in the atmosphere. It also acidifies the oceans. By the early years of the 21st century, carbon-dioxide levels were rising in the oceans more rapidly than any time since the age of the dinosaurs, according to work published by Ken Caldeira and Michael E. Wickett. They wrote: “We find that oceanic absorption of CO2 from fossil fuels may result in larger pH changes over the next several centuries than any inferred in the geological record of the previous 300 million years, with the possible exception of those resulting from rare, extreme events such as bolide impacts or catastrophic methane hydrate degassing.”

A “bolide” is a large extraterrestrial body, perhaps an asteroid, usually at least a half mile in diameter, which impacts the Earth at a speed roughly equal to that of a bullet in flight. “Methane hydrate degassing” involves the rapid conversion of solid methane deposits on ocean floors to gaseous form in the atmosphere by warming temperatures.

Ocean acidification to a degree that damages coral calcification is no longer only a theory. Scientists investigated 328 colonies of massive Porites corals on the “Great Barrier Reef” off Australia that grow to more than six meters tall over decades only tolerate narrow ranges of temperature and salinity.

Results from 69 sections of the reef found that calcification had declined 14.2 percent between 1990 and 2005, impeding the reefs’ growth by 13.3 percent. Such a sudden, massive decline in the reef’s calcification had no precedent in recorded history (about 400 years). Increasing temperature stress and a rising carbon-dioxide level in the water around the reef are the probable causes. “This study has provided the first really vigorous snapshot of how calcification might be changing [worldwide],” said marine biologist Ove Hoegh-Guldberg of Australia’s University of Queensland. “The results are extremely worrying.”

The Monaco Declaration

Concern about rising acidity of the oceans was reinforced in January, 2009 as 155 scientists from 26 countries organized by several international groups under the aegis of the United Nations released a report. “Severe damages are iminent,” the group said in a summary of its deliberations (called the Monaco Declaration) at a symposium in Monaco during October, 2008.

“The chemistry is so fundamental and changes so rapid and severe that impacts on organisms appear unavoidable,” according to James C. Orr, a chemical oceanographer at the Marine Environmental Laboratory in Monaco who headed the symposium’s scientific committee. According to the declaration, “ocean acidification may render most regions chemically inhospitable to coral reefs by 2050.” The group said that ocean acidification will continue to increase unless atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide stop rising.

Carbon dioxide is being injected into the oceans much more quickly than nature can neutralize it. Seawater is usually alkaline, about 8.2 pH. The pH scale is logarithmic, so a 0.1 decrease in pH (the change since the beginning of the industrial revolution) indicates a 30 percent increase in the concentration of hydrogen ions. Under a business-as-usual scenario, the pH will fall 0.5 by the year 2100, increasing the level of hydrogen ions to three times the pre-industrial ‘baseline’ concentration.

Since the industrial revolution began, human beings have infused roughly 120 billion tons of carbon dioxide into the oceans... Every day, each citizen of the U.S. adds, on average, 40 pounds of carbon dioxide to the world ocean.

How Much, How Soon?

As scientists learn more about the acidification of the oceans, the reality of the threat becomes more evident. The date at which increasing carbon-dioxide levels in the oceans are expected to change acidity enough to dissolve the calcium-carbonate shells of corals, planktons and other marine animals has now advanced to the next few decades—sooner than previously projected. Writing in Nature, a team of scientists led by James C. Orr said that, “In our projections, Southern Ocean surface waters will begin to become under-saturated with respect to aragonite... by the year 2050. By 2100, this under-saturation could extend throughout the entire Southern Ocean and into the subarctic Pacific Ocean.”

In addition to corals, many other calcifying organisms that grow calcium carbonate skeletons or shells suffer when pH falls...
the verification regime taking into account experience with the previous treaty and new elements tailored to the limits in the new treaty.

The new treaty limits deployed warheads to 1,550 compared with 6,000 in Start I and delivery vehicles to 800 compared with 1,600 previously. While these are significant reductions, the remaining numbers of weapons are beyond any conceivable rational need.

The new treaty does not deal with missile defense programs. Regrettably, any effort to do this would create significant political opposition. We can also expect that the adequacy of the verification provisions will be strongly questioned. They include on-site inspections, data exchanges and notifications, and facilitate the use of national technical means for monitoring. Our experience over 20 years should provide an answer to these fears.

The next treaty that the U.S. needs to ratify is the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). It bans all nuclear explosions on Earth whether for military or peaceful purposes. The treaty has been ratified by 151 states. The lack of ratification by the U.S. is a road block to ratification by the remaining countries. Over time it has been established that the treaty can be adequately monitored by the “International Monitoring System” and on-site inspections provided for in the treaty supplemented with national technical means.

If the CTBT is presented for ratification, it will require a significant public campaign supporting it. Serious organizing work has been underway for more than a year. Potential Senate supporters have been identified to make up the 67 required votes.

The “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons” (NPT) is longstanding. It was opened for signatures in 1968 and was signed then by the major nuclear weapons states and 59 others. It entered into force in March 1970 with the ratification by the U.S. In simple terms, the treaty places a requirement on the nuclear weapons states to not transfer nuclear technology to non-nuclear states and to undertake nuclear disarmament. The non-nuclear states in exchange agree not to acquire or produce nuclear weapons and are allowed to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. These peaceful purposes include enrichment of uranium to reactor grade. The International Atomic Energy Agency is responsible for overseeing these peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

If the START treaty is approved, there will then be a second effort to ratify the “Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty,” which has been waiting since 1996 for U.S. ratification.

Every five years an NPT “Review and Extension Conference” is held, with the latest meeting having just occurred this past May. While these conferences are a good opportunity for discussion between the participating nations, substantive progress is much more difficult because all decisions are made by unanimous agreement. This has led to some interesting maneuvers to accomplish things like extending the life of the treaty.

It will be interesting to see the results of this meeting. The initial part of the meeting was dominated by the conflict between the U.S. and Iran. While important, this is not an issue suitable for resolution in this conference.

Finally there is a ‘work-in-progress’ that should be mentioned. President Obama organized a “Nuclear Security Summit” in April involving leaders of 47 invited nations. The summit’s stated object was securing and safeguarding vulnerable nuclear materials. The outcome was a non-binding communique and a number of voluntary agreements to secure specific sites. If this is all that results, then it is probably not important. If however it becomes the first step toward a new international agreement that supplements the non-proliferation treaty, then it might be very useful. The fissionable materials are just a narrow part of the materials that need to be safeguarded. Materials that can be used in radiological weapons are important too.

After years of inaction, we are now at a moment where there is the potential to make a significant step toward a world free of nuclear weapons. If we make the most of it, we’ll have moved toward a more peaceful world. But for the potential to be fulfilled, we will need to be watchful and ready to act.

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A Nuclear Weapon-Free World, conclusion
The Climatic Consequences of Coal: Nebraska’s Role, conclusion

Author and activist Bill McKibben is the co-founder of 350.org, an activist group that works to publicize the need to bring down greenhouse-gas levels. The coal question is central to its mission. But with Congress and the largest member states of the United Nations dragging their feet on addressing the climate crisis, 350.org “messengers” like McKibben, Hansen, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Rajendra Pachauri (who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore) are worried that we’re running out of time. Letters and phone calls are still important, but we have no choice but to “take it to the streets.”

In a widely circulated ‘open letter,’ McKibben and the legendary conservationist Wendell Berry called for massive protest at the “Capitol Coal Plant” in Washington, D.C. back in March 2009. Driven by the conscience and the urgency of their mission, Berry, Hansen and McKibben all publicly faced the prospect of arrest for participating in the nonviolent protest against coal burning.

“There are moments in a nation’s—and a planet’s—history,” they stated in part, “when it may be necessary for some to break the law in order to bear witness to an evil, bring it to wider attention, and push for its correction. We think such a time has arrived… We have our bodies, and we are willing to use them to make our point. We don’t come to such a step lightly. We have written and testified and organized politically to make this point for many years, and while in recent months there has been real progress against new coal-fired power plants, the daily business of providing half our electricity from coal continues unabated. It’s time to make clear that we can’t safely run this planet on coal at all.”

The industry claim that there is something called “clean coal” is, they go on to state, is “simply, a lie.” “Clean coal” is a public-relations gambit—whereby carbon dioxide can allegedly be removed (sequestered) and stored underground, or in some cases, under the ocean. The oceans already have been overloaded with carbon dioxide to a point where their acidity has been increasing, imperiling animals with calcium shells that erode in overly acidic water.

Present technology allows only carbon capture that suffers two debilitating problems. First, it is expensive, adding roughly a third or more to the cost of generated power. Secondly, it requires so much additional energy that it nearly defeats its own purpose. Without technological breakthroughs, coal capture remains an industry public-relations stunt, and nothing more.

A call, accordingly, has been rising for a moratorium on new development of coal-fired power because of its climatic consequences. James Hansen has proposed such a moratorium until technology for carbon-dioxide capture and sequestration is available. About a quarter of power plants’ carbon-dioxide emissions will remain in the air “forever”, i.e., more than 500 years, long after new technology is refined and deployed. As a result, Hansen expects that all power plants without adequate sequestration will be obsolete and slated for closure (or at least retro-fitting) before mid-century.

Citizen activism has already delayed or derailed 100 of 150 new coal-powered plants that had been proposed five years ago. From streets to statehouses, the conviction is growing that stopping global warming requires stopping coal-fired power because of its key role in the rising level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Hansen was not arrested that wintry day in March at the Capitol Coal Plant. Nobody was. But several months later, at age 67, the foremost climatologist in the world was among 31 protesters arrested for allegedly obstructing officers and impeding traffic during a protest against mountaintop mining in West Virginia June 23, 2009.

Life is possible without coal. We don’t have to freeze in the dark. There are carbon-free technologies we can be promoting. Here in Nebraska—with the fourth-best wind potential in the entire U.S.—there’s clean, green renewable wind and solar energy. And there’s energy efficiency and conservation as well. (The cheapest kilowatt is still the one you don’t use.)

But we absolutely must put an end to the burning of coal. Spotlighting Nebraska’s integral role as a coal transport ‘enabler’ June 17 in Omaha is a critical step that we in Nebraska can take to impact the national climate debate. See you there.

Bruce E. Johansen is the Frederick W. Kayser Professor of Communication at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and author, in 2009, of Hot Air and Hard Science: Dissecting the Global Warming Debate and the two-volume Encyclopedia of Global Warming Science and Technology.
High concentrations of carbon dioxide dissolved in sea water, however, can inhibit respiration of some fishes and squid, according to marine geochemists Peter Brewer and Edward Peltzer of the Monterey Bay Research Institute in Moss Landing, California, who also spoke at the 2009 AGU meeting. They described watching a squid that had been immersed in a high CO2 test tank sink motionless to the bottom. “We can expect multiple impacts as we go forward into this strange CO2 world,” Brewer said.

REFERENCES
As I write, British Petroleum (BP) attempts still one more time to cap the “Deepwater Horizon” oil spill after a month of failure. Plumes of millions of gallons are spreading their miasma across the Gulf. I shall probably never again have oysters or boiled shrimp at the “Commander’s Palace” or “Brennan’s” or “Corinne’s Dunbar.” I may never see the clear Gulf waves roll gently onto the sands as I have in the past. What I have loved does not remain. Think then of what the pelicans, the turtles, the marsh reeds and the black and Cajun fishermen have loved and lost.

A few nights ago, I dreamed that I was in Philadelphia walking near “Independence Hall” at night. Bombs were exploding all around. Someone told me that the British had landed, captured New York, and were now bombing Pittsburgh to destroy its industry. (My dream geography and history stink). I awoke to find it all just a dream.

Still, the British have attacked—not on the eastern but the southern coast, shoving onto our land the ugly goop that, with the coal we consume, will soon plummet ingle down Saddam. Brits sometimes call BP by the name “Blair Petroleum” because of the closeness of the former government and BP. Not surprisingly, the first post-Saddam oil contracts let by the puppet Iraqi government went to a partnership between BP and a Chinese company. So we have invaded two Middle Eastern countries to profit BP. You’d have thought they’d have shown a little more gratitude.

The present invasion from the South comes from environmental negligence. The workers on the Deepwater Horizon rig told management of the coming catastrophe, and they were ordered to go on. Sounds a little like what BP did when Scott West, a pipeline inspector for the EPA in Alaska, found out for himself—and was also told by BP employees—that the Alaska pipeline was about to burst and destroy the permafrost. The pipe burst in 2006 to much hand wringing and irreplaceable damage to the environment. The oil-friendly Bush Administration killed any serious investigation. But as Truthout puts it, “BP has a criminal history of creating environmental crises. In October 2007, in what West calls a ‘package deal,’ BP settled all of its major criminal cases. BP also pled guilty to a felony for the Texas City refinery explosion that killed 15 people and entered into a deferred prosecution agreement with the DoJ, where the company admitted that it manipulated the propane market.” Then there is the BP connection to the “Exxon Valdez disaster,” where BP bungled the initial clean-up. And BP and Dick Cheney’s Haliburton also have huge financial stakes in the Afghan region. The list goes on.

BP’s coziness with its federal regulators continues. Its employees gave more money to Barack Obama than any other candidate. Perhaps that’s why the executive branch seems so impotent as the oil plumes roll in.

But memory persists.

We should never forget that BP and its ally, the British government, have provoked two wars in which American blood and treasure were lost for oil and greed. Their combined “thank you” is to create two oil spills—both of them apparently preventable—in which our critters, land and water have been destroyed. But let us also remember, as we fulminate, that BP is not the only culpable party. We elect these corrupt governments and use these fossil fuel energy sources that are destroying our land, water and air. We create the multinationals that operate beyond social accountability. I no longer believe in the less, soulless, technocratic institutions without a hint of individual responsibility. And if we continue to allow these bloodless, soulless, technocratic institutions to operate unchecked, they will lead us straight to our environmental graves.

Our country is going broke paying for two major wars and for troop deployments in 130 countries around the world. Like many nonprofit organizations, NFP is directly feeling the pinch of this economic downturn in fewer and smaller donations.

Times are hard, but we need contributions to keep the doors open and the staff paid. Please consider making a truly sacrificial gift at this time. As always, a gift to the Foundation is tax deductible, or if you do not itemize donations, then make your check payable directly to ‘Nebraskans for Peace.’

June 17  Coal Protest in Omaha (See page one article for details.)

Weds.  Anti-War Vigils in Lincoln Held weekly from 5:00-6:00 p.m. at the Federal Building, 15th & O Streets. Call: 402-499-6672 for info.

Sat.  Peace Vigils in Omaha Held weekly from 1:00-2:00 p.m., 72nd & Dodge Streets. For more info, call Steve Horn at 402-426-9068.

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