

INTERVIEW



## An interview with Nnimmo Bassey: Business as usual and false solutions – ‘we must claim climate justice spaces for ourselves’

Nnimmo Bassey and Lee Wengraf

### Introduction

On 17 September 2023, over 75,000 people gathered in New York City for a huge march on the eve of the United Nations’ Climate Ambition Summit, calling on US President Joe Biden to declare a climate emergency and provide a just transition. Over the following days, activists from around the globe gathered for a ‘peoples’ climate week’ of counter-summit events, teach-ins and actions, drawing together indigenous groups, frontline communities and global South organisations.

One such event featured Nigerian environmentalist activist Nnimmo Bassey. Bassey is an author and poet, who chaired Friends of the Earth International from 2008 through to 2012 and was executive director of Environmental Rights Action for two decades. He is the executive director of ecological think tank Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF), based in Benin City, Nigeria. He is also the author of numerous books, including *To cook a continent: destructive extraction and the climate crisis in Africa* (2012) and *Oil politics: echoes of ecological wars* (2016), and the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, as well as an honorary doctorate from the University of York. Bassey has long warned activists that climate change solutions must be systemic, divorced from the priorities of fossil fuel interests and reimagined through a holistic, people-centred lens. As an organiser and speaker at many counter-events to forums dedicated to what he calls the ‘hollow ritual of climate action avoidance’, Bassey’s analysis and advocacy holds out the promise for systemic change from below.

In September 2023, he spoke about the challenges and prospects for the climate justice movement with Lee Wengraf, an activist, author and independent researcher based in New York City, and contributing editor of the *Review of African Political Economy*.

- LW: The peoples’ climate week actions, including the large march on the United Nations, has made clear demands on the world’s leaders for addressing the climate crisis. What developments in the current moment give you a sense of hope for the climate justice movement?
- NB: New initiatives on the continent hold out some promise. For one, the African Climate Justice Collective has been engaged in important work in organising the African People’s Counter COP events. Some of the most important demands are being raised in this context: the urgency to stop the expansion of fossil fuels and to stop all new projects. The core theme of stopping all fossil fuels runs throughout

this work. Other crucial demands are of course place-specific, such as the decommissioning of fossil fuel sites or the need for clean-up, as we've witnessed in the Niger Delta region, where I'm from. Activists are asking for immediate mediation but also reparations for the harm and damage inflicted on communities. Using the courts to establish legal precedents for these reparations has offered an avenue of hope, such as when activists took Shell Oil to court in the Netherlands and were victorious.

The development of a radical wing of the environmental movement is a source of optimism. The radical wing embraces an approach that is collective, broad-based and multi-issue. It is embodied by those most impacted by the crisis, those seeking restoration, and the rights of humans as well as Mother Earth. An end to the abuse of the negation of those rights, but also for justice, for people and for the environment. The radical wing rejects the notion of professionalised green groups, which dominate the conservative wing, such as the conservative non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Such groups talk left but walk right, meaning that they pose the question about transition but don't talk about the means to accomplish that, which is to divest from fossil fuels.

The conservative wing is dominated by the ideas we've seen criticised at the peoples' climate week as false solutions: carbon trading and market environmentalism. This is business as usual, the false idea of 'net zero', where climate mitigation can supposedly be achieved on a global level by creating carbon sinks. Essentially these approaches extend a licence to pollute, and using carbon offsets drives land grabs and other speculation, such as what we've witnessed in Africa. Within this framework, these conservative NGOs will accept any source of energy in the energy mix.

LW: What are some challenges you see facing the climate justice and environmental movements?

NB: For one, we face a serious challenge when African governments say that they need fossil fuels to meet society's needs. It's not true. Use of fossil fuels is not in the interests of the people – it is driven by profit. The movement is growing and more people are asking questions about these government claims, and are arguing that we can manage without fossil fuels. This speaks to the vision people have of an alternative and to meet these challenges. Activists are anticipating the period when fossil fuels are winding down and are meeting the challenge of claims that we still need them – for jobs, and so on. For example, recently in Senegal, the prospect of gas exploration and accompanying jobs and economic growth was rejected by activists refusing to accept that premise. These are conclusions being drawn in many places.

There is a lot of very important organising going on, movements autonomous from those government dictates, mass movements. There is a need today to create more spaces and opportunities for those movements to come out and come together. I'm blown away by what people are putting forward today, by how creative people have been in making their needs heard, and by how clearly people are not deceived by the false solutions on offer. Meeting the need for more opportunities for those voices is urgent for having an impact on those inside the decision-making halls. The jury is still out on whether we will make our needs heard.

The global Covid-19 pandemic set our organising back. Of necessity, many needed to take a major break from climate justice organising. Understandably, people have been in survival mode. Governments were able to take advantage of that moment and move forward aspects of a climate-destroying agenda. Rebuilding our organising means more collaboration and coming together of

organisations, including counter-summits. Internationalism has been gaining strength and convening helps to support that. Our global summits first took root at important gatherings such as at Cochabamba. There are efforts under way to delegitimise those spaces. We cannot allow that and must claim those spaces for ourselves.