Instead, They Awoke a Nation: Environmental Justice in Kahuku

written by Sable | March 6, 2020

New Politics editor's note: This interview, originally published in *Earth First! Journal*'s winter 2019-20 issue and posted here with permission, outlines Hawaii's Ku Kia'i Kahuku environmental justice struggle against a large wind energy installation, the island's tallest structure, in a small, predominantly Brown and minority community with many descendants of native Hawaiians, Filipinos, and Polynesians. Their strategy has involved lawsuits, lockdowns and blockades, and there were over 200 arrests in the span of about a month last fall, beginning with 10 moms on October 13. Perhaps because they oppose a renewable energy project, their campaign has received virtually no attention in many green and Left circles, especially compared to campaigns against fossil fuels, and even compared to Hawaii's Thirty Meter Telescope protests (whose participants overlap with Ku Kia'i Kahuku's). However, the wind farm raises important environmental justice issues: targeting Kauku rather than the surrounding richer and whiter towns, exposing farmers to obnoxious noise, threatening wildlife including endangered Hawaiian hoary bats, affecting sacred mountains, and greenwashing a major fossil fuel polluter (AES Corporation). Although the wind farm has now been built, the latest news is that the Hawaii Supreme Court will hear a legal challenge alleging that the project doesn't sufficiently protect wildlife. Additionally, with community members pledging to blockade construction of a planned missile defense radar facility, mentioned in the interview, the military has put construction on hold. Along with other grassroots campaigns against large-scale wind and solar projects, including in Oaxaca, Mexico, Kahuku's struggle challenges the assumption of some environmentalists that halting climate and ecological breakdown is simply a matter of switching technologies. Below, Ku Kia'i Kahuku participant Damaris posits that the transition to renewable energy must not run through top-down, capitalist growth but rather through justice, decolonization, community participation and *Aloha 'Āina* (love of the land).

Sable: Can you talk about the Kahuku wind farm and why it is being built?

Damaris: Kahuku is a town of about 2,000 people. There used to be a sugar mill there, so there are still tiny plantation houses in the tow. Many community members are descendants of Filipinos, Native Hawaiians, and Polynesians –it's a very Brown community, predominantly people of color. Most of the farms that are located [on the north shore of Oahu] are in Kahuku. Kahuku also has a combined middle school and high school, a tiny hospital, and an elementary school. The middle school and high school service kids from Ka'a'awa all the way up to Sunset. We have kids from this whole side of the island who go to Kahuku.

My husband grew up in the Kahuku area and he remembers that there were wind turbines already there, but that they weren't operating, dilapidated, and breaking apart. At some point, those were removed, and 12 new ones were put up about 10 years ago.

Hawaii has the most expensive electricity in the United States, so people started wanting to put solar panels on their houses so that they could pay less for electricity and also utilize the federal and state tax breaks. However, Oahu is operated by an energy company called HECO [Hawaiian Electric Company]. (They actually helped overthrow the Hawaiian kingdom). HECO told the residents of Kahuku that they could not put solar panels on their houses because the variable energy that was produced at Kahuku was already coming from the wind turbines and the grid couldn't allow any more variable energy from Kahuku.

Residents were pissed. If the goal of the state is to be on renewable energy, then why was this company discriminating against us and allowing wind turbines? The wind turbines are far away from the grid, 60% of the energy these wind turbines produce is used just to take the rest of the energy back to the grid. It's not efficient. A couple of years after they put them up, one or two of the turbines caught on fire, so they shut the whole thing down for a while. Even then, they didn't allow residents to put solar panels on their houses. Then they told the community that they wanted to put up even more wind turbines that were going to be bigger and closer to houses, and the community wasn't OK with that.

At that time, people also complained about health issues. I'm a little wary of talking about health issues because I know that there isn't a lot of scientific research around all the health issues from wind turbines, but some people claim that there is this thing called infrasound, which is very low-frequency sound that affects people's health.

I am friends with a lot of the farmers who claim that there are two things that happen: one is the sound. Wind turbines sound like a constant lawnmower. That sound can be bothersome for a lot of people, especially when you're trying to sleep; it's just this constant noise nuisance. The other thing that happens is called "shadow flicker". During sunrise and sunset, the wind turbines create shadows. It flickers and bothers people, gives them migraines, and makes them nauseous. These are farmers who are working outside all day, and so the shadow flicker is a huge nuisance.

As for the the other health stuff, there's no official scientific proof, although I do know people in Kahuku who are selling their houses because they have been getting sick, and they believe it's from the turbines. These aren't just the farmers who live close [to the turbines]. These are people who live in the community.

There were talks about building eight new bigger turbines. They're planned to be 568 feet tall. They would be the tallest structures on Oahu, taller than any building in Honolulu. And the closest one is 700 feet away from the nearest farm. Most states and countries have setback laws—where a wind turbine needs to be, for example, three miles away from the nearest house. In Hawaii, there isn't a real setback law. It's basically what the manufacturer says—and the manufacturer says 700 feet is totally safe.

There were two places that they could have put these in Hawaii that supposedly had optimal wind for the turbines—one was here in Kahuku, the other one was in the town of Hawaii Kai, which happens to be the richest neighborhood on Oahu. Of course, the mayor decided not to put them there.

These wind turbines are built in front of James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge, a national wildlife refuge for birds. Hawaii has a native endangered bat called the ʻōpeʼapeʼa, and that's where they nest. Wind turbines kill bats, not just from the blades, but the [changes in air pressure] actually make their insides implode. The fact that they're building it in front of this wildlife refuge is awful and should be totally illegal.

The community is saying, "No, we don't want this." Our property values are going to go down, we're getting sick, and there's no direct benefit to us. The solar panel issue is still a problem, and the company that's building these turbines (their name is AES) owns the last coal power plant on Oahu. They are a huge corporation which has done horrible things in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and parts of Africa. The state is saying that we're going to be 100% renewable energy by 2045 while giving these huge contracts to AES. There's no plan to actually kill their coal power plant. They're just giving this corporation the ability to make more money off the backs of this poor community.

With wind turbines there's a subsidy in place from the federal government. Companies get a 40% tax break when they set up wind turbines. However, that's going to end starting January 1st, 2020, which is why this company wanted to put up these turbines by the end of the year.

So, on October 13 they wanted to start moving the turbine parts from Kalaeloa, another little town in Hawaii, to Kahuku. That night, a group of 10 moms tied themselves together with ti leaves (a native Hawaiian plant), ties, duct tape, and a chain. On Sunday, the first night that they were unable to transport the parts and their permit to do so only lasted until Thursday night. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, we set up a tent and set up stations in Kalaeloa and in Kahuku. We got word that on Thursday, October 17, they were going to move the parts no matter what. So another group of moms went out to Kalaeloa and tried to block the road and got arrested. The parts came to Kahuku and about 30 people were arrested that night. We had about 500 people in Kahuku taking direct action by blocking the road.

We were out there all night. We're practicing *Kapu Aloha*: peaceful, nonviolent protesting. So someone—it was no one from our group—went and cut a pole down on the highway, blocking the road and further slowing the transportation process.

Those first parts eventually did get there on the 18th because AES just ingnored the permitting process. It was hard for the community because they had been fighting this for so long. The next night that they were going to transport parts, was Sunday the 20th, the night that I got arrested. From October 13 to November 20, there was direct action every single night and it was exhausting. We had over 200 arrests.

This is a predominantly Mormon town where people are not really rabble rousers. But it was the last straw for the community. Just to give you an example, my first grader's teacher was there with us because her mom was a *kupuna* (elder). The elders were the first ones to get arrested in Kahuku; they put themselves on the line first. My kid's teacher was going to get arrested, but it was 5:00 in the morning and she needed to go teach, so she went home to teach our kids while most of the parents were getting arrested. It was this huge emotional drain and burden for the community, because either people were getting arrested or they were taking care of kids and other community members.

The city sent out 240 cops to arrest us. I didn't even know they had that many cops on Oahu, because our community is so neglected. The school that my kids go to—there's all these shitty things that happen, and we ask the cops to come but they always say they're understaffed, yet somehow the city was willing to pay an exorbitant amount so that these cops could come and arrest us every single night.

On the night of November 7, the cops got violent with us. They had bikes that they used as weapons by jabbing them in our ribs. That was really a hard night for the community because not only did a bunch of people get arrested, but a lot of us who were on the sidelines got hurt. It was a traumatizing night.

Right now, the parts are all here, and they've already built four turbines. They're working around the clock to get them up. We have two lawsuits underway. One is Rights of Nature—we're trying to protect the bats. And the other is challenging the permitting process since they got permits to do this without an Environmental Impact Statement.

This is an environmental justice issue. Why is it that this community is getting the turbines and not Hawaii Kai? Why is it that this community can't put solar panels on their houses? Why is the city giving our biggest polluter this contract?

It's been a little challenging to get support from other environmental groups on the island because people are so focused on getting to 100% renewable energy. But I think it's necessary for us to ask these questions and make sure that we are involving local communities, Indigenous communities, communities that are going to bear the burden of wind turbines the most.

Yeah, I've definitely seen lots of people with whom I've fought pipelines who are totally in favor of wind farms and all kinds of renewable energy. I think there's going to be an increasing amount of struggles like this one—environmental justice issues that are caused by renewable energy projects.

Exactly. There are two ethnographies that I just got copies of by anthropologists who studied the same issue in a community in Mexico where there was a wind farm that went up.

I don't believe that we can fight climate change with the same capitalist tactics that we have been using.

The mayor [of Honolulu County] said that we're going to sue these fossil fuel companies and hold them accountable—we're going to sue Shell and BP and all these companies. But our biggest polluter is AES, and he just gave the contract to AES to put these wind turbines in our community! And these guys are there for profit. They don't care about the community. We ask questions and they don't answer them. They're going to make a huge profit and then they're going to leave.

Of the 12 turbines that went up 10 years ago, three of them are broken and not operational. Who's going to fix those? A different company put them up and that company's already gone. They already got their tax break. They already got their money. They're not interested in fixing them. That's the issue: there's no maintenance, there's no upkeep, and it's going to be the same thing that happened with the other ones: they're going to rust and fall apart. Who's going to clean it up?

This was our question to AES: In 20 years, you have to decommission these turbines. Where are they going to go? They're massive. There's no landfill in Hawaii that would take them. They responded that they would probably just leave them or bury them in the mountains in Kahuku. Mountains are very sacred for Hawaiians. The community is seeing their sacred mountain getting blown up with

dynamite to put in these massive structures for energy, and there's no plan for how to decommission them in a way that is sustainable. A lot of fossil fuels were used even to bring them here and to make them.

Hawaiians have names for their mountains. They have names for their wind. The wind in Kahuku is especially important and it has a special name. I'm not talking about a dead culture—my children go to Hawaiian immersion. Their school is a public school and it's all in Hawaiian. So the culture is very alive and well, and they learn about the name of this wind, and it's very offensive to the community to see that their wind is up for sale. We do need to move away from fossil fuel, but how are we going to do that? By steamrolling over poor communities? Are we going to do that by involving communities? We need to ask these questions. At the same time that I took my kids to the climate march, I've also been completely involved with Ku Kia'i Kahuku. I think if we are not taking in the environmental justice component, we're not going to get to 100% renewable energy in Hawaii, or anywhere really.

Do you see a connection between cultural revitalization and these environmental justice movements?

Yeah, absolutely. For example, this year was the first year that their school had two kindergarten classes. It's always been one kindergarten class, one first grade class, one second grade class, and one third grade class, because there's not much enrollment. But this year, after what happened in Mauna Kea—after the *kupuna* were arrested, I believe it was July 17—there was a huge surge in Hawaiian immersion enrollment all over the state, and our school was no different. We had about 20 more kids enrolled in the program.

A *kupuna* I really love said they thought they were building a 30-meter telescope, but instead they awoke a nation. And I think that's very true. There's a lot more interest in Hawaiian culture and in the whole *Aloha 'Āina* movement. *Aloha 'Āina* means love of the land, which is what Hawaiian native culture is all based on. I'm not trying to romanticize it, but that's what it is.

How did this community that's not rabble-rousing come around to doing direct action? How did it get to that point?

Ku Kia'i Kahuku started with 10 moms. Kanani, the president of the organization, is Catholic; she goes to church every Sunday. These are community members who got more and more involved, just going to community association meetings, and decided to take action.

First, the parts would leave from Kalaeloa. The trucks could leave at 11 PM, so they would arrest everyone there that night who put themselves on the line. If we weren't there, then we would watch on Facebook Live to see what was happening. I there with Kanani, and we had just watched our friends getting arrested. I was emotional. She was fine. She's amazing. We're sitting there and stuffing envelopes for her daughter's first birthday party, (which in Hawaiian culture is like a wedding or a *quinceñera*). At the same time that she's getting ready for the cops to come and getting ready for the direct action, she's also planning her baby's birthday party.

To me, that's amazing. It's just a testament to who these people are. I remember being there thinking, *I can not believe that it's 3:00 in the morning*. We're getting ready for the cops to come. We're getting ready for another emotional night. And here she is doing this because life goes on. That's who we were. I'd come home. I'd take my kids to school. I'd still have to work. We would call ourselves Team No Sleep. But we couldn't pull ourselves away, because it wasn't just one night of direct action; it was over a month. Even though every night that they moved the parts, they won, we didn't give up. I couldn't just let it happen without being there with the rest of my community

members who were putting themselves on the line. We couldn't stand for this.

There have been some community divisions. The town of Kahuku is right next to the town of Lai'e where Brigham Young University (BYU) is. It's a much whiter town because there are a lot of white Mormon transplants who live there [because of the university]. Their community association signed a deal with AES allowing AES to come through town—even though the turbines are in Kahuku! They're getting $20,000 a year for it.

That's the part that's so heartbreaking. They know how to divide up a community by bribing people. It's hard because these are family members—someone's auntie or someone's uncle or someone's cousin—who are implicated in this. But overall, I feel like the community as a whole became much stronger.

In the middle of all this, the military comes and tells us that they're planning on building an 80-acre defense missile radar in Kahuku. We asked, how much energy does this missile radar need? It ends up being the exact same amount that the wind turbines are producing. I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I don't know if they're related to one another. What I do know is that as a state, if you want to be all about renewable energy, you need to stop letting the military build all these huge structures in Hawaii that use so much electricity.

We can't get 100% renewable energy and have the same rate of development and build and consume things at the rate that we are. We build these eight huge turbines and now we're also building this huge military defense radar system that's going to use up all this energy. But the community meeting for that was packed. It was standing room only. A year ago, our community would have an issue and very few people would go to the community association meetings. Whereas now, hundreds of people are going.

Photo by Carlos Mozo