

It's Earth Day. Thanks, Toyota!

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Save the earth by buying a Prius? That seems to be the takeaway message from this year's Earth Day New York taking place on April 22. Earth Day events in the city will be sponsored by - Who would have guessed? - Toyota.

Perhaps the organizers of Earth Day New York want to find out just how low our expectations could go for what passes as solutions to the imminent ruin of our planet. Perhaps they feel we should be grateful that Earth Day is not being sponsored by an even bigger gas guzzler like Jeep. Let's take the day, they might tell us, to put aside our worries about the U.S. transportation industry and the fact that it is responsible for a third of the country's climate changing emissions. And let's, for the moment, erase from historical record the role of automobile and oil companies in dismantling train and electric cable car systems across the country in the 1930s and 40s—systems that could have led the way to an ecologically sustainable transportation system.

To be fair, Toyota is not the *only* sponsor of Earth Day New York. There are other corporations as well. Like that savior of the environment, Con Edison. Yes, that same Con Ed that is so beloved among New Yorkers not only for its high bills, but also its complete disregard for the lives of New Yorkers and the safety of our homes.

A recent pipe explosion in East Harlem that killed eight people, and injured almost fifty others, exposed an ailing and ancient piping system currently managed by Con Ed. Fifty eight percent of Con Ed's pipes were installed before 1960, and "sixty percent are composed of unprotected steel or cast iron, the most leak-prone material," according to a report cited by Daily Kos. The New York Times reported that "Consolidated Edison, whose pipes supplied the two buildings leveled by the explosion, had the highest rate of leaks in the country among natural gas operators whose networks totaled at least 100 miles." ()

In fact, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) found that the the 8-inch Con Edison gas main at the East Harlem site failed a pressure test when tracer gas was pumped into it. That main was installed in 1887. Whatever the outcome of the NTSB investigation, the billions of dollars that it will take to replace old fossil fuel infrastructure will leave us with the same lethal dangers.

Then there's Con Ed's preparedness for increasingly frequent "natural" disasters. As author and activist, Chris Williams pointed out in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Con Ed refused to "spend the \$250 million in investment the company deemed necessary to install submersible switches and move high-voltage transformers above ground level, things that may have prevented the explosion that wiped out electricity in lower Manhattan—even though the company made \$1 billion in profit last year."

The corporatized Earth Day also boasts board members representing New York real estate and marketing companies, corporate lawyers, and companies who help to "greenwash" business events, alongside of a smattering of environmental NGOs. The president of Earth Day New York, Pamela Lippe, is a consultant for "green skyscrapers" like the Conde Naste building, and the new Bank of America Tower at Bryant Park.

Environmentalists might recall that Bank of America has historically been a major investor in coal and mountaintop removal. Rain Forest Action Network has declared them "the leading investor in dirty, polluting coal." But their skyscraper sure is green!

The whole day would be laughable if it weren't for the fact that it points to a broader crisis we must face as a society. Our greatest challenge is to transform the transportation and energy infrastructures that currently have us on a collision course towards the destruction of the planet. Yet we are constantly being asked to swallow the idea that same companies that are making a killing off of the toxic status quo should also be dictating the solution.

After all, is an Earth Day sponsored by Toyota any stranger than a State Department "environmental impact" report on the Keystone pipeline that is authored by an organization with known financial ties to TransCanada Corp., the company seeking to build the pipeline?

In the face of the maniacal growth of unconventional and dirty fuel extraction, climate change reaching a "tipping point" of no return, and a Democratic administration that has embraced an "all of the above" energy strategy, we need a real, grassroots movement, independent of corporate funding and corporate "solutions."

In response to the corporate Earth Day, a coalition of grassroots organizations is planning a set of actions to reclaim Earth Day. Reclaim Earth Day will be part of a Global Climate Convergence that unites environmental justice with social justice, and calls for a Global Green New Deal. Rather than accept the divide and conquer tactics that pit jobs against environment, we support full employment and 100% clean renewable energy by 2030.

As Jonathan Neale recently wrote: "We already have the technology. It would take between 100 million and 150 million workers 20 years to do it for the whole world... Some people say we couldn't afford the money. But when the banks needed government help, the money was there. If Mother Earth were a bank, the politicians would already have rescued her."

If you want to build this kind of a moment, and you don't think Toyota should lead the way, join us at Zuccotti Park on April 22 at 5:00. Bring yourselves, your friends, a sign or plant, and your vision for a better world.

*Hadas Thier a member of the New York chapter of System Change Not Climate Change.