

Bringing solutions to COP21 — a conversation with Cooperation Jackson’s Brandon King

Organizers from the frontlines of the climates crisis are in Paris to build the kind of power that will force governments and corporations to listen.

Kate Aronoff December 7, 2015

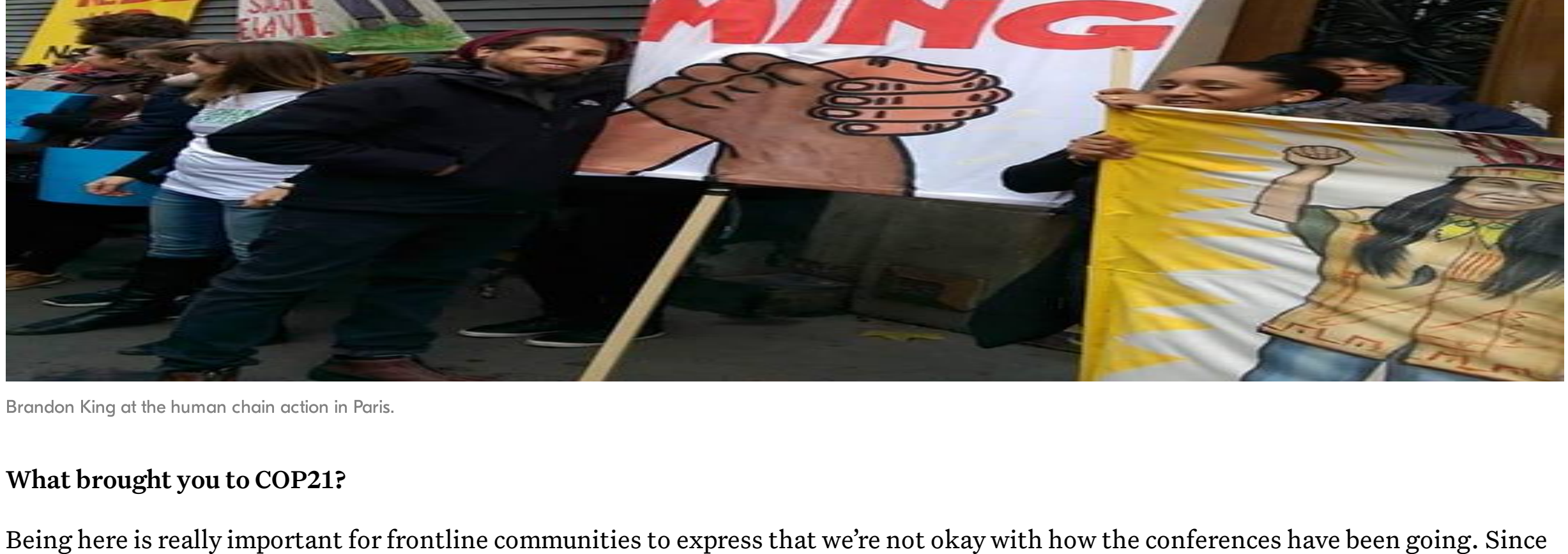


It Takes Roots poster

Within the high-stress, low-waste frenzy of the 21st Conference of Parties, or COP21, there are around 100 organizers from the frontlines of the climate crisis and energy extraction in North America. Drawn from the Navajo Nation, the Appalachian Mountains, Harlem and elsewhere, the It Takes Roots delegation is a joint venture of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, Indigenous Environmental Network and the Climate Justice Alliance. Its members — some inside and some outside of official UN proceedings — are engaged in a range of efforts back home both against fossil fuel extraction and for the development of community-owned alternatives, as well as a wider-reaching “just transition” away from what they call an extractive economy.

The delegates have come to COP21 demanding that the U.S. negotiating team commit to binding emissions cuts; leave fossil fuels in the ground; reject fracking, nuclear power, carbon markets and “other dangerous technologies and false solutions;” strengthen the agreements’ commitment to human and indigenous rights; and support community-rooted solutions. For those understandably cynical about the potential of COP21, the most apparent question might be simply, “Why bother?”

Brandon King, a member of the It Takes Roots delegation, is also a lead organizer with Cooperation Jackson. After graduating from Hampton University, King worked for two years with the labor union UNITE HERE in New York. His involvement in the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement there eventually took him to Jackson, Mississippi, where he worked on the late Chowkwe Lumumba’s successful mayoral campaign. After Lumumba’s death, he and the rest of Cooperation Jackson have continued to drive forward the vision outlined in the Jackson-Kush Plan — in particular its goals of economic democracy. I sat down with Brandon in Paris the other night to hear what the delegation and Cooperation Jackson alike are hoping to bring and take away from the climate talks.



Brandon King at the human chain action in Paris.

What brought you to COP21?

Being here is really important for frontline communities to express that we’re not okay with how the conferences have been going. Since the first COP, carbon emissions have risen astronomically. Their meetings haven’t been effective, and there’s been international outcry about that fact. We’re here sharing that we actually have solutions to the climate crisis.

We’re also here to stand in solidarity with migrant communities. For us, the attacks on November 13 were a reminder that the fossil fuel economy fuels war and unrest. Then, governments create enemies out of people — out of Muslim, Arab and black communities. We see those communities as being our communities.

What are the groups within the It Takes Roots delegation — many of which are doing incredibly local work — getting out of an international conference?

This is an opportunity for us to link with frontline communities around the world that are engaged in doing one transition or another to renewable energy — figuring out the creative ways that people have been doing it, and sharing different strategies for implementing transitions in our own communities.

Negotiators at COP don’t really have a reason to listen to us. We have to make them listen to us, and we can do that by strengthening our work at home and building a base that is connected globally. That will help us move internationally and collectively toward a system change. Constant economic growth on a finite planet that has limited resources is psychotic; it’s a road to destruction. We know that, and we want to look out for our children, our children’s children and our children’s children’s children.

What has your experience in Paris been like so far?

One of the first actions that we took part in was the human chain action that happened near Place de Republique. This was after November 13, when the French government declared a state of emergency. Tensions are high, and they’ve banned public protest. There was supposed to be a huge march in Paris, with thousands upon thousands of people from all over the world. With all that happening, it sort of limited frontline communities’ ability to engage democratically in the process. The government used the terrorist attacks to squelch any dissent, and any opposition to what the government and corporations think.

I’m very excited by the courage of people here. Even though the government discouraged people from marching and made it illegal to march, people said, “It’s a democratic right. We have a right as human beings to express our discontent with the way that things are going.” The human chain action was an example of that. It’s a climate that feels similar to the United States right after 9/11. You’re told to rally behind the flag, and listen to the government. Us listening to the government has led to our communities being in disarray. It has led to our communities not being organized. It has led to our communities not having the things that we need to survive.

In large parts of the United States, climate change can be seen as several steps removed from basic fights for survival like that being waged by the movement for black lives. What do make of that disconnection?

It’s really unfortunate that there’s a disconnect between those two things. I see the murder of black people every 28 hours in the United States as a direct signifier of the ecological imbalance. Black people are part of the environment. Climate and violence are some of the most clear indicators of a society that isn’t working in ecological balance.

Connecting with migrant communities here in Paris that face some of the same anti-black racism and xenophobia as our communities back home is a way of bridging some of those gaps. It’s very unfortunate that those attacks happened, but it has made the It Takes Roots delegation’s analysis sharper in terms of understanding more deeply that the violence immigrant communities face needs to be a priority when we’re talking about climate justice.

Conversations about the refugee crisis in Europe tend to get segmented off from those about immigration in the United States. What do you see as the similarities?

In the United States, the overwhelming narrative toward immigration is: “These people are taking our jobs. These people don’t deserve to be here. These people are terrorists. These people are lazy.” But that same kind of rhetoric is being touted here in France. Just yesterday, some folks from the It Takes Roots delegation visited a community called Sarcelles, about an hour away from Paris, which is a predominately Arab and black community. Their projects look different than where we are in Jackson, but the conditions people face are extremely similar.

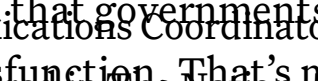
On the way back from doing the exchange with folks, we saw two black men get pulled over by the police. There was no one on the road. For me, the question was, “Who are they disturbing?” It hit home that to be black anywhere within this world is to be criminal. That’s something that people see here, that people see in the United States, that people see in Latin America. That’s something that people see in Asia and Africa — everywhere. When we’re talking about system change and a just transition, all of those things need to be taken into account while we’re building the “new.”

What do you see as possible for Cooperation Jackson and other members of the It Takes Roots delegation coming out of Paris?

Indigenous communities have been building strength over the last couple years, and have been really on the front lines in terms of fighting fracking and the Keystone XL pipeline, for instance. They’ve seen high levels of extraction and pollution, and are bringing their history of struggle; they’re bringing their understanding of and relationship to the land to COP21. Talking with colleagues who are part of the It Takes Roots delegation inside the talks, it seems like there’s a constant struggle for them to maintain what rights they have within COP21 texts, which other nations are now attempting to strip.

Inside-outside strategies work for some communities, but for black communities, we weren’t included in the first place. One of our objectives here is to build with other black communities toward a just transition. If the COPs were actually effective organizing bodies and not just talks, they would include legally binding caps on carbon emissions. Countries wouldn’t be able to choose what emissions levels they want to meet in order to comply. It should be scientifically bound, and it should have a timeline. If we left it up to these governments and corporations, they would give themselves 100 or 1,000 years to get to appropriate levels of emissions. Those commitments don’t actually mean anything because — when we get to that level — no one will be here.

The United States and other world superpowers have a climate debt. Since they’re responsible for so much of what has fueled climate change, they should be responsible for paying reparations, and funding the transition for frontline communities all over the world: in Kenya, Latin America, the United States, the Philippines, everywhere. If COP21 was really concerned about confronting climate change, it would implement these sorts of measures.



Will you be back for COP22?

Kate Aronoff

It’s incumbent upon us to build the power we need to demand that governments and corporations actually don’t have the power to do what they want. They should have to listen to us, or face total dysfunction. That’s my hope: that we’re able to build the kind of base that not only in the United States, but internationally. Something that seems important in terms of engaging internationally is the ability to connect to communities that are doing similar work around the world: in communities figuring out how to survive the best. We’re figuring out not only how to survive, but how all of us can live fully affirmed lives. If COP22 happens, then that will be another space where we can express our frustration with the process, but also engage with other social movements from around the world that want a system change.

Photo: Kate Aronoff, Brandon King, and other members of the It Takes Roots delegation.

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