

The Energy Justice Movement:
Working Against Utility Companies and the President

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When individuals think about climate change and how to combat it, what commonly comes to mind? Some may think of hippy or tree-hugger ideology, protecting the environment while lessening dependence on the consumption of the market economy. Others may think of former Vice President Al Gore, who is one of the most influential political officials in the realm of environmentalism. Some may even conjure up visions of the Green New Deal, a massive attempt by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey to shift the United States economically into an environmentally just country. The movement to protect the environment goes much deeper than these visions of combatting climate change, including the topic of this paper: energy justice. Throughout this piece, I will describe what energy justice is, the issues it addresses on micro, miso, and macro levels, how the movement functions, the counter movements, and my personal attestation about energy justice, including its impacts and my expectations for it in the future.

Energy justice, a subset of environmental justice, is defined by the Initiative for Energy Justice as follows:

Energy justice refers to the goal of achieving equity in both the social and economic participation in the energy system, while also remediating social, economic, and health burdens on those disproportionately harmed by the energy system. Energy justice explicitly centers the concerns of communities at the frontline of pollution and climate change (“frontline communities”), working class people, indigenous communities, and those historically disenfranchised by racial and social inequity. Energy justice aims to make energy accessible, affordable, renewable, and democratically managed for all communities.¹

1. “Home,” Initiative for Energy Justice, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://iejusa.org/>

The problem that social movement organizations are attempting to address is, in its most basic terms, the rising monetary and environmental costs of energy on communities, and the corporate greed that fuels those costs. This corporate greed is present because of the monopolies that utility companies have in several states. Having a monopoly over a utility would allow these companies (mostly) free rein on increasing utility costs, as they do not have to compete with other companies for customers. Even as public service commissions attempt to serve as a check on these utilities, utility companies will push for candidates to be appointed to these commissions that have previously taken money from said companies or been friendly with them.

The theoretical framework surrounding the energy justice movement appears to take from what Staggenborg and Ramos call the synthetic approach, which combines the theory of research mobilization and the political process model.² This approach views social movements as political entities that create social change.³ As discussed earlier, the movement extends already existing master frames by building on and running parallel to the environmental and climate justice movements. Even beyond the broad movement against climate change, the energy justice movement also incorporates concerns that intersect with racial, economic, and gender justice movements. The energy justice movement also exists on the concept of intersectionality.⁴ As discussed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, looking at the intersections of different demographics is necessary because it “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when

2. Suzanne Staggenborg and Howard Ramos, *Social Movements*, Third edition / Suzanne Staggenborg, Howard Ramos, Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2016.

3. Staggenborg and Ramos, *Social Movements*, 24-26.

4. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

considering how the social world is constructed.”⁵ When examining energy justice, the movement adopts an intersectional view based on the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and other marginalized statuses. This intersectionality is often viewed in the language used by energy justice organizations. For instance, in a Sierra Club article by Sharonda Williams-Tack, the author describes how energy justice should be used to push back against climate change, identifying that “We face multiple interconnected crises: the impacts of systematic racism, an economic downturn, a worldwide pandemic and a climate crisis that has made extreme weather events the norm.”⁶ Williams-Tack goes on to describe an example of these crises, identifying how, following a devastating winter storm in Texas, “Black and Latinx communities were the first to face power outages. Low-income Texas families already spend a disproportionate amount of their income on utility bills, in part because of the physical condition of their homes.”⁷

As it may be evident, the energy justice movement and its intersectional framework are rooted in earlier climate and environmental justice initiatives. An article from Uche O. Ajene of the Initiative for Energy Justice outlines how the current iteration of energy justice stems from and works alongside climate and environmental justice efforts. The African American community of Warren County, North Carolina, sparked the environmental justice movement in 1982 when it was unsuccessful in preventing a hazardous waste landfill from being put in their backyards. This sparked a movement that highlighted how low-income communities and communities of color disproportionately bear the burdens of a worsening environment,

5. Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1245.

6. Sharonda Williams-Tack, “Climate Justice is Energy Justice,” Sierra Club, April 21, 2021, <https://www.sierraclub.org/articles/2021/04/climate-justice-energy-justice>.

7. Williams-Tack, “Climate Justice.”

eventually leading the United Church of Christ to confirm patterns of environmental racism across the United States in 1987.⁸ As climate activism accelerated in the late 1990s, the climate justice movement and its advocates pointed out that marginalized communities and Global South nations would bear the brunt of climate change, even though they were the individuals least responsible for the changing climate. The climate justice movement expanded the environmental justice movement's principles to include intergenerational and international equity concerns. As the energy justice movement has evolved from these movements, it has further expanded these principles, recognizing that "access to clean, affordable energy is a fundamental human right with overwhelming implications for health, economic opportunity, and social mobility."⁹

Given the recent salience of the movement, the movement has mostly made moves toward growth. Organizations like the Sierra Club and the Initiative for Energy Justice are at the forefront of this movement. While it may not be explicitly stated as part of their mission, other organizations also engage with the energy justice movement. For instance, the Sunrise Movement, a movement of young people originally organized around the Green New Deal, could be seen as an informal member of the movement. The primary problem that the Sunrise Movement identifies that they need to address is that "fossil fuel executives and the politicians they employ have driven us to climate catastrophe. And now, we are at a crossroads...are we going to let billionaires and fossil fuel executives lead us to a hotter, more brutal world?"¹⁰ The Sunrise Movement's framework works in climate and environmental justice. It also implies that

8. Uche O. Ajene, "What is Energy Justice? A Comprehensive Introduction," Initiative for Energy Justice, June 10, 2025, <https://iejusa.org/energy-justice-101-what-is-energy-justice/>.

9. Ajene, "What is Energy Justice?"

10. "About Sunrise," Sunrise Movement, accessed April 28, 2026, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/about/>.

their movement would engage with energy justice tactics and issues. Again, because the energy movement has become more salient over the past decade, a lot of the so-called “decline” would be rooted in the counter-movements of the energy justice movement.

Just as with any social movement, the energy justice movement has micro- (individual), meso- (organizational), and macro- (large-scale) issues. Micro-level issues in the energy justice movement could be how the rising costs of utilities create outrage, motivating individuals to join the movement. Creating shared community spaces and meeting individuals where they are at would help individuals take on collective identities and feel solidarity in the energy justice movement. For meso-level issues, leaders and organizations frame the injustices that plague frontline communities in a way that prompts those affected and their allies to be able to amplify their voice in testimony and through recruiting more members. Coalitions are also formed on more local levels in the energy justice movement, as utilities work in specific areas of states, allowing for a broader coalition of organizations. Lastly, macro-level issues are seen in how utility companies across the country are taking advantage of “inflation” to raise rates. This predatory practice allows for the creation of a grievance that stimulates the collective action of the energy justice movement.¹¹

In addressing the movement’s issues, the primary constituencies are the aforementioned frontline communities from the definition of energy justice: those disproportionately harmed by the energy system. The framing for the movement centers on these frontline communities, showing how everyone can be affected by the greed of utility companies. As part of the tactics of the campaign, individuals become mobilized. One of the most important parts of the education of an energy justice campaign I worked on was deep canvassing, where the Sierra Club went door-

11. Staggenborg and Ramos, *Social Movements*, 35.

to-door and had 15–30-minute conversations with individuals. After discussing utility issues with these individuals, we would invite them to energy justice meetings, and they could then be mobilized to testify before public commissions and go canvassing with us. Individuals also mobilized through the media, furthering the movement. The energy justice movement engages with the media by writing letters to the editor and op-eds in news publications. Those, combined with press briefings, would make justice salient in the media.

The most obvious countermovement to the energy justice movement would be the lobbying work done by monopoly utilities and fossil fuel companies. It all comes down to money for these companies; so long as the energy justice movement succeeds, the profit margins of these utility and fossil fuel companies will suffer. Companies attempt to circumvent the slashing of their profits through greenwashing, where a company will deceitfully advertise that they are being more sustainable than they actually are. An example of this is when, according to Earth.org, BP changed its name to Beyond Petroleum and affixed solar panels to the top of all of its gas stations. The company had a complaint lodged against it in 2019, “for misleading the public with its advertisements that focused on BP’s low-carbon energy products, when more than 96% of its annual spend is on oil and gas.”¹²

Another current counter movement to the energy justice movement is the actions of the current presidential administration. When he took office as the forty-seventh president of the United States of America on January 20, 2025, Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement. The Trump administration discusses that the United States has been a global leader in the movement to protect the environment, including advancing environmental

12. Deena Robinson, “10 Companies Called Out For Greenwashing,” Earth.org, July 17, 2022, <https://earth.org/greenwashing-companies-corporations/>.

and economic objectives that are models for other countries. However, the Trump administration believes that entering into environmental agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement “does not reflect our country’s values or our contributions to the pursuit of economic and environmental objectives,” further describing how American tax dollars are being sent to smaller countries that “do not require, or merit, financial assistance in the interests of the American people.”¹³ Having corporations and the government working against the movement is less than ideal for it.

The primary successes and failures of the energy justice movement both have to deal with utility companies. For successes, the energy justice movement has been successful in preventing utility companies from fully raising rates on customers. While it is a failure that the increase happened, organizations like Missouri’s Sierra Club chapter were able to organize and lobby for “rates increase \$355 million, lower than the \$446.2 million Ameren Missouri requested, and the fixed fee for each customer will remain \$9.”¹⁴ A failure of the energy justice movement is that utilities are backsliding on their transition to renewable energy. As the Sierra Club has pointed out, “...utility companies are still overwhelmingly not planning for the clean energy transition and millions of Americans are facing the consequences of a grid powered by polluting fossil fuels. At the same time, electricity bills are increasing faster than inflation.”¹⁵ Sometimes, the

13. “Putting America First In International Environmental Agreements,” The White House, January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements/>.

14. Edward Smith, “Social Safety Net Erodes During Ameren’s Latest Rate Case,” Sierra Club, April 23, 2025, <https://www.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2025/04/social-safety-net-erodes-during-ameren-s-latest-rate-case>.

15. Christine Ho, “NEW Sierra Club Report: Utilities Backslide on Clean Energy Transition,” Sierra Club, September 22, 2025, <https://www.sierraclub.org/press-releases/2025/09/new-sierra-club-report-utilities-backslide-clean-energy-transition>.

failures of the movement are not due to the movement itself, but the temporal moment that the movement exists in, which is especially true under the current Trump administration.

Two primary impacts of the movement are immediate in my experience of the energy justice movement: making corporate greed a salient issue and empowering individuals with the tools to combat that greed. A lot of the work in the energy justice movement is education on issues that affect individuals. Some individuals have no clue that what they are experiencing is an experience shared by their neighbors, and others may have favorable views of their utility providers because of the disinformation shared by those companies. Working with the Sierra Club, I had to frame data about how St. Louisans are impacted by the actions of Ameren in a way that is digestible for people who are not new to the movement. We then had to work to bring those people in to become engaged in the movement as it affects them, which we did through community meetings. At these meetings, we would provide opportunities for training in how to write a letter-to-the-editor, testify at Public Service Commission meetings, contact legislators, and other forms of civic engagement. We also worked to empower individuals to do deep canvassing and educate their neighbors with us, so that their neighbors see there are individuals in the community who have a personal stake in being a part of this movement.

The energy justice movement impacts my communities and me because of how it advocates for our pocketbooks. Without the energy justice movement, my community and I would feel isolated about the issue, and we would have no collective voice against these companies. I also believe that having the energy justice movement brings communities together and further prompts community collaboration on a host of other issues. In my own work on energy justice, we often helped communities clean up after natural disasters, educated K-12 students on issues, and more. This has impacted my understanding, in that I am now informed

about how rates are adjusted. Additionally, the movement has shifted my perspective on what can be involved in the larger movement against climate change.

The energy justice movement will persist so long as utility companies continue their predatory practices against consumers and politicians support (and take money from) those companies. For these companies, consumers are only seen as a revenue source and not as humans. An example of this is seen in St. Louis, Missouri, under the predatory practices of Ameren Missouri. According to an article by Kate Grumke of St. Louis Public Radio, over 90,000 homes across Missouri were disconnected from electricity in 2024. Several of these disconnections were in St. Louis City, where the older homes are “harder to keep cool in the summer and warm in the winter, and there are more of them in historically red-lined neighborhoods.”¹⁶ This means that areas with an average annual income of around \$35,000 are paying approximately \$400 more a year on utilities; on average, those individuals with a lower income pay \$2,408 in utility bills, while those making \$85,000 per year only pay \$2,082.¹⁷ Ameren is willing to disconnect those individuals because they are no longer generating revenue for the company, as they are missing payments. Additionally, Ameren can make up for that lost revenue by going to Missouri’s Public Service Commission and asking for a rate hike; an example of this is the 15% increase in utility rates passed in 2025.¹⁸

My expectations for the energy justice movement are siloed into two groups: the present and the future (post-Trump administration). In the present, I expect the movement’s priorities to

16. Kate Grumke, “Low-income St. Louisans pay more for utilities than wealthier counterparts,” St. Louis Public Radio, January 30, 2025, <https://www.stlpr.org/health-science-environment/2025-01-30/low-income-st-louis-utilities-energy-burden>.

17. Grumke, “Low-income St. Louisans.”

18. Grumke, “Low-income St. Louisans.”

be to hold ground and push back against the Trump administration's actions against climate change groups. Holding the ground and pushing back against the movement will be achieved through local, state, and national action. On the local level, sustaining growth could look like continuing to host organizing meetings and educating community members on what energy justice is. On state levels, a lot of the current work for the energy justice movement can be sustained through pushing back against utility companies at public service commission meetings and testifying for or against state legislation that impacts citizens and their pocketbooks. On state and federal levels, energy justice organizations can continue to combat the Trump administration and the predatory practices of utility companies in the courts, arguing that what these entities are doing violates the constitutional rights of individuals living in the United States.

My future expectations for the energy justice movement really hinge on the party of the person elected president of the United States in 2028 and the partisan composition of both houses of Congress following that election. On the one hand, if a Democrat is elected president and the Democratic Party controls both houses of Congress, then it would theoretically be a favorable environment to advance clean energy alternatives and work to alleviate the issues affecting frontline communities. On the other hand, if the Republican Party (GOP) controls the presidency and at least one house of Congress, then the energy justice movement would have to sustain its current practice of not allowing for victories to roll back. If the GOP controls Congress following the 2028 election (or even if one house is controlled by the GOP) and a Democrat is elected president, there would still be avenues for advancing the energy justice movement on a national scale; the advocacy would have to shift more toward executive orders signed by the President, and policies instated in the Department of Energy, Department of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency, among other areas.

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