



## Highlights: The Reclaim Our Power: Utility Justice Campaign

The Reclaim Our Power: Utility Justice Campaign is taking on California’s failing private utility model and calling for a restructuring of the state’s energy system to meet the needs of our most impacted communities—towards the vision of a new decentralized, democratized energy system in California.

The corporate utilities in control of our energy system are putting in jeopardy the lives of low-income communities; Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color; medically vulnerable communities; people with disabilities and the elderly. These are the communities most at risk from climate disasters, fossil fuel energy pollution, utility-caused wildfires, intentional power shutoffs, escalating electricity bills, pandemic-caused unemployment (and energy poverty), and other life-threatening utility injustices.

In response, the Campaign is mobilizing frontline communities and their allies to intervene in the energy decision-making process in California—and to transform our energy system into one that can meet the environmental, economic, and racial justice needs of our communities.



The Campaign’s energy system restructuring started with opposing the public bailout of one of the nation’s most powerful and corrupt monopoly utilities—PG&E—and continues with efforts to create new energy policies, programs, and institutions shaped by our communities, that advance an equitable, sustainable, and resilient energy system.

Led by frontline community-based organizations, the Campaign’s leadership team includes the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA), Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), North Bay Organizing Project (NBOP), People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Justice (PODER), Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project (MG), Youth vs. Apocalypse (YVA), the Disability Justice Culture Club (DJCC), and Local Clean Energy Alliance (LCEA).

In the year-and-a-half since its launch, the Campaign has played a key role as the voice of our community in opposing state actions that reinforce the centralized, private utility model and in advocating for a redirection of California’s energy resources—toward strengthening community-based energy development, equity, energy resilience, and democratic energy decision-making.

***“If social justice forces and allies can succeed in altering the energy decision-making process in California, it will have far-reaching consequences. It will be a key step in transforming our energy system into one that is public, decentralized, equitable, and serves human needs—as opposed to one based on commodity production for corporate profit.”***

2019 Campaign proposal

## **The Challenge**

In the wake of unprecedented climate-induced, utility-caused wildfires and utility shutoffs of power across Northern California, the January 2019 filing for bankruptcy protection by PG&E, one of the largest utilities in the U.S., represented an explicit example of how climate change is impacting key economic institutions and resulting in major fallout for people's lives.

### ***High Stakes***

At issue is whether our social justice movements can impact the anticipated economic and social consequences of a failed energy system, especially for frontline communities.

On the one hand, PG&E destroys whole communities at a cost of tens of billions of dollars and shuts off power to millions of people across Northern California, leaving our most vulnerable populations without electricity for days. On the other hand, the corporate giant is absolved of responsibility and protected from financial liability by the state's legislature, the Governor, and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC).

PG&E is literally getting away with murder at ratepayer and taxpayer expense. The socialization of losses and the privatization of gains does not get much more brutal than this.

### ***An Emerging Movement to Democratize Energy***

The failure of the centralized, corporate utility model has given birth over the last several years to a national movement for an alternative, decentralized energy model based on the distributed nature of renewable energy resources. In California, this movement has its expression in the establishment of 25 public Community Choice energy agencies, in the successful legislative efforts of the [California Environmental Justice Alliance \(CEJA\)](#) on behalf of the state's disadvantaged communities, and in the advocacy of business interests focused on the deployment of distributed energy resources (DERs).

*How* we advance this transition to a democratized energy system through the Reclaim Our Power Campaign is uncharted territory. Hopefully, the Campaign's achievements so far will serve as a basis for continued support in growing the Campaign's capacity and political influence.

### ***A Rapidly Changing Landscape***

From the start, the Campaign has confronted a rapidly changing energy and political landscape, creating challenges for the Campaign to be both relevant and effective.

In the year-and-a-half since the Campaign's launch, we have gone from public outrage at PG&E's criminal negligence of public safety, to the utility's bankruptcy filing to avoid 2017 and 2018 wildfire damage costs, to the state legislature's action to limit PG&E's liability for future utility-caused wildfires, to the Governor's and CPUC's approval of a PG&E bankruptcy exit plan that stiffens ratepayers and wildfire survivors to restore the utility's profitability, to the CPUC's continued failure to hold PG&E accountable for its continued safety violations, to a legislative and regulatory amnesia in which PG&E is once again granted the reins of power over California's energy system.

## Major Campaign Accomplishments

In its brief existence, the Reclaim Our Power Campaign has not only been recognized as a key voice of frontline communities but is also creating a path for success against many odds.

The Campaign has registered a number of accomplishments that have put it on California's energy advocacy roadmap. These accomplishments represent important steps toward building the political power base needed to weaken the centralized, corporate utility model and to transform state energy policies and programs to meet community needs.

### ***Building Out the Campaign***

The Campaign is an outgrowth of widespread anger and popular opposition in late 2018 and early 2019 to a public bailout of PG&E's liability for the tens of billions of dollars in damages the utility caused. The Campaign is an effort to channel this spontaneous opposition into an organized movement for utility justice—an equitable restructuring of the energy system.

The first six months of Campaign, leading up to its official launch in February 2020, is described in a 2019 [Campaign Progress Report](#). It involved the initial staffing of the Campaign and establishing a leadership team of organizations rooted in the struggles of low-income communities and communities of color. It included creating the Campaign's guiding vision, researching and analyzing existing energy system restructuring proposals, organizing street protests, meeting with the Governor, and establishing thought leadership regarding energy system restructuring.

The contours of what a 21st-century energy system should look like are clear—we need a web of decentralized, distributed energy systems that generate, store and distribute clean renewable power locally and regionally. We need to unplug dirty gas power plants that poison our air and bodies. Workers and communities must be able to make meaningful decisions about our energy systems, not private corporations like PG&E. And we need to start building the 21st-century energy system in frontline communities that have been unfairly burdened by the status quo.

*Letter to Governor Newsom, November 2020*

Following the launch, the Campaign has continued to build out its infrastructure, staff resources, and advocacy instruments—even in the face of the COVID pandemic. When we make a call to action, hundreds sign petitions and scores make public comments at meetings of the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). In September 2020, the Campaign organized a Reclaim Our Power Summit to establish a Campaign Support Committee consisting of 75 organizations that have signed-on to and mobilized support for these and other Campaign actions.

### ***Engaging on Key Issues***

#### **The PG&E Bankruptcy Bailout.**

No sooner had the Reclaim Our Power Campaign launched in February 2020, when a significant drama began unfolding at the CPUC. Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), one of the largest private utilities in the U.S., had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection to avoid paying \$30 billion in damage claims from wildfires caused by the utility in 2017 and 2018. A bankruptcy settlement had to be reached by end of June 2020 for PG&E to be eligible to tap into a utility wildfire

insurance fund the state legislature had set up (AB 1054) to shield the utility from liability for any future wildfires it causes.

A necessary step for exiting the bankruptcy court was CPUC approval of PG&E's (extremely problematic) Plan of Reorganization, which the Governor supported, in a surprise political flip in support of the utility, late in March.

The Campaign moved into action. It exposed the cost of the Reorganization Plan to ratepayers, the cost to wildfire survivors, and how it failed to enact the kind of operational and safety overhaul needed by our communities (see [PG&E's Bankruptcy Exit Plan and What It Means For You](#)).

The Campaign also launched a series of efforts to get CPUC to reject or significantly change the bankruptcy exit Plan. Those efforts involved both an inside game of filing briefs and meetings with

decision-makers, and an outside game of organizing and protest actions that included street protests, an online press conference, and protest comments at four consecutive CPUC meetings, all described in the [Reclaim Our Power Campaign Action Update](#).

Ultimately, while not preventing the bailout of PG&E, the Campaign did push the CPUC to create an accountability process that, if implemented, could trigger the takeover of PG&E. In addition, the work brought voices of fire survivors, youth, people with disabilities, and more into the arenas of power, and established the Campaign as the main organized force in California opposing the bankruptcy exit plan and advocating for utility justice.

**Comment of Tré Vasquez to CPUC Commissioners, May 28, 2020**

I've lived through two wildfires in Sonoma County. During both fires, my community worked tirelessly—sacrificing sleep, meals, and the comfort of our own homes to care for those who had been displaced and traumatized by these fires caused by the recklessness of PG&E. We can't overlook the fact that all of this could have been prevented, and we should not have to live our lives doing damage control due to corporate greed.

Here in Sonoma County our relatives who work in the fields were back out working in evacuated areas

while wildfires were still burning. What I'm saying to you is that there are those of us whose lives are considered an afterthought. If this plan goes through to bail out PG&E, what that says to us is that our lives are worth sacrificing to conduct business as usual.

This is your opportunity to hold investor-owned utilities accountable. We need a transformational energy system based on a clean, decentralized energy model. We can build real solutions that value people and the earth before profit, and today you have the opportunity to make an ethical and humane choice. Please do so before it's too late.

## Community Driven Energy Resilience

In October and November of 2019, about three million Californians had their power deliberately shut off by the state's three investor-owned utilities. These shutoffs were an attempt to prevent devastating wildfires caused by faulty utility equipment and lax safety measures. As usual, those most impacted by the loss of electricity were elderly people, those with disabilities or medical needs, and those with the fewest material resources.

The public outrage at these utility shutoffs resulted in legislation (SB 1339) calling for the CPUC to initiate a proceeding to promote commercialization of microgrids for California communities. (Microgrids are integrated electric generation and storage systems that can be isolated from the grid and continue to function during power shutoffs.) That CPUC proceeding issued a proposed decision to be approved by the CPUC shortly thereafter, on January 14, 2021.

In response to the proposed decision, the Reclaim Our Power Campaign [wrote the CPUC](#), recommending five changes to the proposed decision to address the urgency for community-based resilience centers and community-designated critical facilities to mitigate the impacts of power shutoffs.

The Campaign also mobilized around two dozen organizations from across the state to phone in to the CPUC business meeting on January 14 in support of points in the Reclaim Our Power position. The action garnered considerable press about the CPUC failure to address community energy resilience needs.

Developing microgrid projects for buildings that serve our community energy needs are critical now and through the climate crisis. From this perspective we are concerned that instead of creating conditions for community owned and controlled microgrids, the [proposed decision] expands the investor-owned utilities stranglehold on our energy system by facilitating development of complex microgrids to be owned and controlled by the utilities.

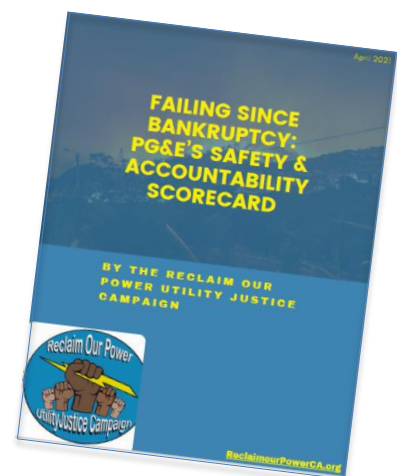
*Letter to CPUC, January 2021*

## Failed Accountability for PG&E Safety Failures

The PG&E bankruptcy exit plan, approved in June 2020 with the blessing of the CPUC, was meant to resuscitate the failed utility on condition, explicitly, of the utility addressing the neglect of safety and damages that led to its filing for bankruptcy protection.

Yet nine months later, PG&E had failed to deliver on its bankruptcy exit plan conditions. PG&E caused yet another wildfire, killing four people and burning over 56,000 acres; had failed to make significant hardware upgrades to power lines to reduce wildfire risk; had continued to engage in reckless power shutoffs, jeopardizing vulnerable communities; had failed in its promise that ratepayers would not have to pay for its safety failures; and had stiffed wildfire survivors on promised compensation.

To highlight these failures, Reclaim Our Power documented its findings in a [PG&E Safety and Accountability Scorecard](#).



The Campaign also [wrote the CPUC on March 30, 2021](#) to demand it hold PG&E accountable. The letter made four demands on the CPUC to address its failed accountability process.

In addition, the Campaign unleashed a social media blitz, including release of [an engaging video](#) to promote a petition to the CPUC in support of the Campaign’s letter. That blitz was followed by an online press conference and two hours of community comment at the CPUC’s April 14 meeting to call Commissioners to task for their failure to protect our communities.

Since the June 2020 approval of the Plan of Reorganization, we have seen little oversight exercised by the CPUC. PG&E has continued down the path of death and damage to our livelihoods through its negligence, shortcuts, and prioritization of profit over human life. Your accountability process needs to focus on the core of what is at stake: stopping PG&E from putting our lives on the line to line the pockets of shareholders.

Letter to CPUC, March 2021

While Commissioners acknowledged and responded to this barrage of criticism, they failed to act accordingly.

### ***Establishing Campaign Credibility and Respect***

As a result of the engagement on issues cited above, and the passion evident in the creativity of Campaign supporters through murals, videos, testimonials, and other actions, the Campaign has already made its mark. It is increasingly recognized as a force worthy of attention by energy decision-makers and the state’s energy advocacy community.

Despite its formal proceedings, the decisions of the CPUC are highly political in nature. As a result of our actions described above, Commissioners have been increasingly willing to meet with the Campaign, recognizing that it represents an important part of the public that the CPUC is obligated to serve.

The Campaign’s standing has also been recognized by the legislature. As the struggle over the PG&E bankruptcy exit Plan was drawing to a close, the Governor introduced a bill in the legislature—SB 350—just in case PG&E failed to successfully emerge from bankruptcy. SB 350 provides for the state to create Golden State Energy, a public benefits corporation, to take over PG&E under specified circumstances. In recognition of the Campaign’s stature, it was one of only three parties invited to [testify at the Assembly committee hearing on SB 350](#), as the bill passed through both houses at bullet-train speed in early June 2020, even in the midst of the pandemic, and was signed by the Governor.

The Campaign has also met twice with the Governor’s staff, though it appears that the Campaign has a way to go to represent a power base that can contend with Wall Street interests.

At the same time, the Campaign has been increasingly recognized in California’s energy advocacy landscape as an important player. It has garnered support for its actions by the organizations of the Campaign Support Committee as well as other organizations around the state that recognize the importance of the Campaign’s stance on utility justice.

Thus, the Campaign is on a path of building the political power base needed to influence the state’s energy decisions.

## Current Initiatives

Frontline communities in California are directly threatened by two impending energy crises: the planned lifting of a CPUC pandemic moratorium on utility shutoffs, and the early onset of California's wildfire season. Each of these pose challenges to the Reclaim Our Power Campaign to develop policies and programs that can protect our communities.

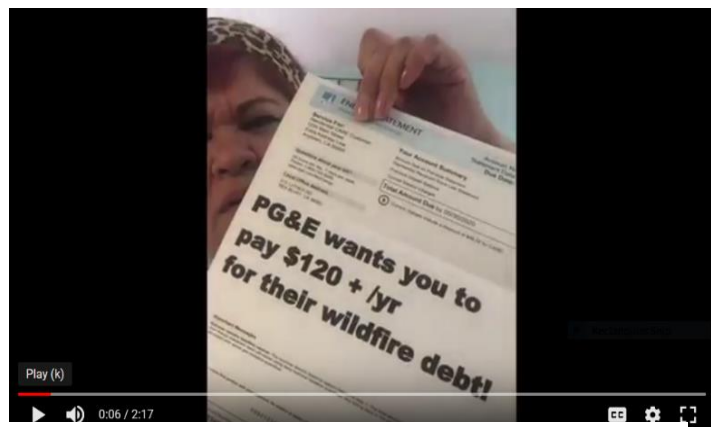
The Campaign is currently working on three fronts to address these issues:

### Utility Debt Cancellation.

As the pandemic threw huge numbers of utility customers out of work and unable to pay utility bills, the CPUC enacted a moratorium on utility shutoffs due to customers' inability to pay utility bills. That moratorium is due to be lifted, requiring customers to pay their current and past bills, or be subjected to shutoffs for failure to pay. Most of these customers are still unable to pay utility bills, let alone pay off a year's worth of utility debt. The campaign sees energy, not simply as a commodity, but a needed resource—a human right.

The Campaign is calling for this utility debt to be cancelled and absorbed by utility shareholders. We have seen ratepayer bailouts time-and-again of utility shareholders (most recently, the PG&E bankruptcy settlement) to the tune of tens of billions of dollars, and now is the time for utility shareholders to return the favor.

This is especially relevant in the face of huge, anticipated utility rate increases to pay for the safety failures of the utilities.



[Reclaim Our Power Video on PG&E rate hikes](#)

### PG&E Accountability

Efforts to hold PG&E accountable for its safety failures are a continuing initiative of the Reclaim Our Power Campaign. The CPUC's failure to protect Californian's is now urgently on the agenda following an extremely dry winter—reservoirs are at an all-time low—and fires have already broken out.

In addition to utility-cause wildfires, the state is anticipating a dramatic increase in utility power shutoffs that will leave millions of Californians without power for days on end, and especially impact low-income and medically vulnerable communities.

As noted earlier, the CPUC has not held PG&E accountable for 2020 wildfires, for failure to adequately harden the grid, or for inadequate wildfire mitigation plans. The Campaign is working with other parties to force the CPUC to hold PG&E's feet to the fire.

Ultimately, this would mean a state takeover of PG&E as provided for by California legislation, SB 350.

## **Community-Microgrid Demonstration Projects**

In light of the certainty of increased utility-caused power shutoffs and the failure, as described earlier, of the CPUC to spur the development of microgrid energy resilience in our communities, the Reclaim Our Power Campaign has launched an initiative to develop microgrid-based resilience hub demonstration projects in San Francisco Bay area communities.

Resilience hubs are trusted facilities in our neighborhoods that provide critical services to our communities and which can continue to function as microgrids when grid power is shut off. These resilience hubs can provide emergency services to those most at risk from power shutoffs.

The Campaign has assembled a cohort of community-based organizations to learn about the process of developing microgrid projects in their communities and about the resources needed and/or available to assist in that process. Through this cohort the Campaign hopes to demonstrate the value of community-based energy resilience, to build capacity for developing the kind of renewable energy projects needed in our communities, and to create political momentum to scale community microgrid development in our communities.