

Imagining the Future: This Is What Climate Justice Looks Like

What will future generations say about our time?

Perhaps they will say it was during the 2020s when powerful enemies of the Earth — fossil fuel giants and corporate polluters — finally were confronted by an explosion of activism and organizing from students, workers, and ordinary people. Perhaps the 2020s will be known for its huge, unprecedented demonstrations, regularly in the hundreds of thousands of people — with some more than a million. Daily occupations to shut down oil pipelines, fracking operations, coal mines, fossil fuel export facilities — and the banks that fund these planet-wrecking activities. Students demanding that classes not just *teach about* the climate emergency, but that schools *take action*. Perhaps they will say it was the decade when the voices of everyday people finally set the political agenda.

No doubt, the cascading emergencies will be part of it: the horrific heat waves, the worsening and deadly wildfires, Arctic ice melting at unprecedented rates, millions of climate refugees, devastating floods, storms and droughts. But let it also be remembered for the action, the organizing, the demands of people like you.

You are already coming together in huge numbers — not just to fight against fossil fuels and greenhouse gas pollution, but to create a new society of fairness and equality. You represent organizations working on **housing, immigration, Indigenous rights, food and farming, youth activism, jobs, and racial justice**. And if this is going to be the decade it all started to change for the better, you'll need a robust vision of what you're fighting for — you'll need to be able to imagine the future.

The Visioning Conference

You have come to this conference to join others in planning the future. Too often, the future we're fighting for exists only as an abstraction — “equality,” “freedom,” “safety.” But what do those things actually look and feel like in a society, in our day-to-day lives?

The great African American poet Lucille Clifton said, “We cannot create what we can't imagine.” Your job at this conference will be to join with individuals from other organizations to come up with a vision that illustrates the slogan for the gathering — **This is what climate justice looks like!** This vision will guide your activism in the United States and be a basis for building solidarity with similar activism throughout the world.

We have powerful enemies who benefit from today's distribution of wealth and power. We need each other. Another world is possible — but it is up to all of us to imagine what it looks like and to make it happen.

The Visioning Conference: Mural Assignment

One goal of this gathering is to design murals that can be painted on the walls and hallways of schools across the country that can bring to life the stories of community activists like you who refuse to give up hope that a better world is possible and are leading the way toward creating a more hopeful future. Remember: “We cannot create what we can’t imagine.”

In this moment, hope can be hard to come by — especially for young people whose lives have been defined by worsening climate disasters, racist violence, a pandemic, wars, and the stubborn refusal of those in power to embrace change. Today’s social movements have to find ways to counter despair and to help people envision the world they want to live in, not the one they’re told they have to accept.

With other members of your mixed-role group, **create a mural** that illustrates the world you want for future generations:

- Drawing from your roles and conversations with other groups, what are the **images and words** that best capture this vision of the future?
- Consider including **language** from your found poems to complement the images you create.
- What does this future look like in the lives of people within your community?
- Your mural should include the visions and hopes of every role in your group.

Cheyenne Antonio, Diné

The Red Nation

My home, Pueblo Pintado, is called *Nahodeeshgiizh Ch'inilini* by my people. In the Diné language, that means “water flowing from canyon.” The canyon is Chaco Canyon, which is a World Heritage Site and a U.S. National Historical Park in New Mexico. And the water? Well, like so much else in Indian Country, it’s been stolen.

Forty percent of homes in the Navajo Nation do not have running water. My great-grandmother does not have access to clean water, but she lives right next to a gas pipeline. That is a familiar story here: Exploit the land, neglect the people.

If you visit the Navajo Nation, you can’t miss the ugly evidence of decades of all-out oil and gas production. There are more than 30,000 wells on our sacred land, leaking toxic waste into our air and water. There are about four oil spills a day in New Mexico. In 2019, there were 2,811 spills, releasing 23,600 barrels of crude oil; in the same year, 812 million cubic feet of so-called natural gas leaked from wells in the Permian Basin, which includes the Southwest corner of New Mexico.

Our *sacred* land. What does that mean? It means that tribes, nations, and pueblos — people — share this land. But there is also medicine here. Not “medicine” in the sense of pills or tinctures you ingest to fix an ailment. I mean spiritual power. You cannot separate the health of our land from the health of our people, our culture, our families, our bodies.

This is not the first time my people have been poisoned. Mining companies promised us “good jobs” and blasted 4 million tons of uranium out of Diné land between 1944 and 1986 — so the U.S. government could make nuclear weapons. During that time, my people inhaled radioactive dust and drank contaminated water. Since the 1970s, we’ve had horrifying rates of cancer. In some areas stomach cancer was 15 times the national average, and in parts of the reservation filled with old pit mines, it was 200 times the U.S. average for women ages 20 to 40.

But it is not just the toxins that made me an activist; it is also the social costs of the exploitation of our land. According to a study for the U.S. Department of Justice, there are counties in the United States where murder rates of Native American women are 10 times higher than the national average for all races. These acts of violence are overwhelmingly committed by non-Native people, and are particularly likely around “man camps,” the temporary housing projects that provide housing to the hundreds, and

often thousands, of workers brought to an oil, gas, or mining project — often on or near Native land.

These rapes, murders, and disappearances are part of what I mean when I say that our land is sacred — harming the land means harming the people. By organizing the National Day of Awareness of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Womxn and Girls, I was trying to live by what my elders have always stressed: Be a good relative.

Being a good relative also requires that I care about the broader state of this world. That's why I organize with the Red Nation. We are dedicated to the liberation of Native peoples from capitalism (which drives the oil and gas industry) and colonialism (which deprives Native people the power to protect our land). You've heard of the "Green New Deal." We talk about a Red Deal because we want a future that prioritizes Indigenous liberation. But the policies we want — policies that recenter our relationship to each other and to the Earth over profits — are not just for Indigenous peoples. They are for everyone.

We talk about "land back." Land back means returning the control of land to Native peoples. The U.S. government has shown itself wholly unable to protect Earth; our planet is teetering on the brink of ecological collapse. Why would I trust the future of my people to a government that has stolen my land, poisoned my water and air, and left my sisters and brothers sick with cancer and victimized daily by settler violence? To me, land back makes a simple argument: We can decolonize or go extinct.

My great-grandmother cannot drink the oil that runs through the pipeline near her home. She, like you, like me, needs drinking water, clean air, and good food. She, like you, like me, needs to feel safe in her home and on her land. She, like you, like me, needs good health care and access to medicine — both chemical and spiritual. I want all of that for my great-grandmother. I want all of that for you. I want all of that for all of us.

Alma Maquítico

El Paso, Texas

Co-director, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

I migrated to the United States from Mexico. I live on the border in El Paso, Texas. In the Borderlands, we see so much injustice. But we also see people fighting for their rights, fighting for better lives.

When I was little, I began to think about what causes people's lives to be so hard. I saw that the root of injustice is people's lack of land, and how the land has been stolen and attacked by the rich and powerful.

For years, I worked at El Paso's Border Agricultural Workers Center. The Center offers services for more than 12,000 migrant farmworkers in the region, including a clinic, cafeteria, and a safe haven for workers to sleep. Many farmworkers who come to the Center were small producers in Mexico. Some lost their land. Some still own land, but the land won't produce. In the early 1990s, rich people in Mexico, Canada, and the United States got together to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA. This agreement devastated poor farmers throughout Mexico. NAFTA meant that cheap corn, grown by huge U.S. corporations, could "freely" flood into Mexico. Small farmers could not compete. At least 1.3 million people lost farm jobs in Mexico in NAFTA's first few years. By 2008, corn exports to Mexico rose from 2 million tons a year to 10.3 million tons! Think what that means to a family in southern Mexico trying to make a living farming corn. Mexico also lost 4,000 pig farms because of NAFTA. And Mexico passed laws making it easier for corporations and rich people to kick poor farmers off their land.

Many people felt forced to migrate north — not because the United States is so wonderful, but it was the only place where they could find work and survive. And when they arrive in border towns like Juarez or Tijuana — or across the border in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, or California — the rich continue to exploit migrants, paying low wages, and often forcing them to work in unsafe conditions. They treat them like criminals and even spy on them. Just today, as I was being interviewed by a reporter, we heard the loud whop-whop of a helicopter. I told him, "Get used to it. It's the militarization of the border. We have drones, we have helicopters that are here constantly. And we always have to put up with it. One time, a drone fell into someone's backyard, can you imagine?" This is why my organization, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, helps people fight for justice — the right simply to live as human beings.

What does all this have to do with climate change? Lots. The same wealthy individuals, corporations, and governments that have bullied Mexico and other poor countries for so long, have polluted the atmosphere with carbon dioxide, which has dramatically changed the climate.

Let me tell you just one typical story: In early 2019, a Guatemalan farmer — call him Juan — felt forced to leave Guatemala. The climate is changing there. For five years, it rarely rained. Then it rained and rained, and Juan planted his last corn seeds. The corn sprouted — big healthy green stalks. But without warning, the river flooded. Juan waded chest-deep in his fields, hoping to find some corn cobs to harvest and to feed his family. But he found almost none. Juan felt forced to do the unthinkable: He signed away ownership to his small tin-roof house where he lived with his wife and three children for \$1,500 to buy okra seed. But after the flood, there was no more rain, only drought. All his crops died. He and his wife decided that if he did not leave for the United States to find work, his family would starve. So he left.

At the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR), we hear these stories over and over. Climate change is bringing about more extreme natural disasters. We know that, so often, the circumstances for immigrants and refugees in the United States are tied to climate change — and the need for climate justice. Migration is a human right. It is a way for poor people to survive — to “adapt” to a changing climate. But wealthy countries do not act responsibly with respect to migrants from poor countries. We demand that migrants be treated with dignity. They leave their homes through no fault of their own.

We still work under a system that criminalizes the right to migrate and to seek refuge. This must stop. As the U.S. economy is rebuilt with a Green New Deal, there must be legalization of immigrants; the rights of all workers must be protected.

Leah Penniman

South End Albany, New York

Soul Fire Farm

Most folks can't say that farming saved their lives. I can. My teenage years were hard, growing up in a family that had issues with addiction and violence, but I was blessed at 16 to receive a summer job on a farm in Boston. Before farming, I wasn't sure where I belonged in the world, or if I even had a reason to live, but there's something about putting a seed in the ground, caring for plants, and harvesting food to nourish people that has given my life meaning.

I've also found purpose in the Afro-Indigenous farming traditions of my ancestors, like my great-great-great grandmother, Susie Boyd, who was kidnapped from West Africa in the 1690s. Her enslavers forced her to work in the Carolina rice fields. Before they were stolen from their homes in West Africa, many women like Susie gathered seeds of their most valued crops — okra, cowpea, black rice, millet, sorghum — and braided them into one another's hair, ensuring these foods and the traditions that surround them could continue in the Americas.

After decades of racist farming policies, fewer than 2 percent of U.S. farmers are African American, but Black people still have a sacred, ancestral relationship with soil. In some West African communities in Ghana and Liberia, elders still measure a town's age by the depth of the rich, black soil created by generations of farmers. Hundreds of years of enslavement, sharecropping, and land-based violence toward Black people in the United States, have led us to confuse this oppression with the land itself.

At Soul Fire Farm, we believe that Black liberation includes repairing this relationship with the land and soil. We want to lift up the rich history of Black land stewardship, characterized by farmers like George Washington Carver, one of the first scientists to promote regenerative agricultural practices like growing legumes (beans) as a cover crop to restore soil health — a practice that we still use on our farm.

In this spirit, we use Afro-Indigenous farming practices on our 80 acres of land to grow our produce, including fruits, plant medicine, livestock, honey, mushrooms, and vegetables. We provide most of our harvest to people living under food apartheid. It's common to describe areas where people lack access to affordable, nutritious food as “food deserts,” but this makes it sound like these areas occur naturally as part of the

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landscape; we prefer instead to talk about *food apartheid* to describe the reality that people of color disproportionately suffer from food insecurity and diet-related illnesses.

We practice “solidarity sharing” so that the people in our community most in need have access to the delicious, nourishing food we grow on the farm. Through grants and partnerships with other organizations, we deliver weekly shares of produce to local prisons and immigrant welcome centers. In offering this food, we acknowledge and continue the work of our movement ancestors in the Black Panther Party who brought attention to food apartheid when they started their free breakfast program in Oakland in 1969.

When we use Afro-Indigenous, *regenerative* farming practices at Soul Fire Farm we also “sequester” carbon from the atmosphere and return it to the soil. When European settlers began farming the land stolen from Indigenous tribes in the Great Plains, within one generation of plowing the soil they depleted up to 50 percent of the organic matter that it contained — which had taken hundreds, if not thousands of years, to develop. In the time we’ve been farming at Soul Fire we’ve increased organic matter in our soils fourfold from 3 percent to 12 percent, through no-till, cover cropping and polyculture farming.

For 20 years, I’ve studied Afro-Indigenous farming with relatives in Ghana, West Africa. They were shocked to hear that U.S. farmers plant seeds without rituals of song, dance, celebration, or the simple act of saying “thank you” to the Earth for nourishing us. They told me, “That’s why you are all sick — because you treat the Earth like a commodity, and not like a relative.”

Through workshops and internships on the farm, we help to train the next generation of Black and Brown farmers to be the healers we need, both on the land and within our food system. We’ve also expanded our food justice programs off-site to help build urban gardens through our “Soul Fire in the City” program, which includes support for crop planning, growing assistance, and gatherings for gardeners to share the joys and successes of harvesting food from their gardens.

How do we build a more just and sustainable world? What might this world look like? At Soul Fire Farm, we’re learning to create a relationship with the land centered on repair instead of exploitation, and finding ways to transform our racist, capitalist food system into something that provides nutritious food to all people.

Suzanna Kassouf

Portland, Oregon
Sunrise Movement

In 2018, I felt my world dissolve as I read article after article on the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. The world's scientists were *screaming* that we had 12 short years to cut our global emissions *in half* if we wanted to prevent runaway climate change: fires, droughts, floods, hunger, sea level rise.

I felt overwhelmed with grief, panic, and despair — mourning the career I wanted to build, the children I wanted to have. Would it even be possible for me to become a grandmother?

The articles made me feel panicked, but I couldn't stop reading them. People were already dying from the climate crisis — from fires in California, drought in sub-saharan Africa, storms in east Asia. The articles talked about the flood of climate refugees, already swelling — 100 million expected by 2050. My ancestors are from Syria, which is experiencing the largest refugee crisis in the world because of climate-fueled conflicts. In the news, I kept seeing people who looked like me, begging for food, water, and shelter, desperately risking their children's lives to send them on flimsy boats across the Mediterranean, just to arrive in hostile countries. I imagined these children as my own, their crisis as my future, unless we started acting.

But we *weren't* acting. Everywhere, people were living as if all was normal. They were driving to work, talking about a movie they wanted to see.

I felt profoundly isolated. The climate crisis was all I could talk about. I couldn't unlearn what I knew, and I couldn't understand why everyone was ignoring this massive injustice. I spent months in a dark place. I became depressed. I even considered suicide. I didn't know how to live with the weight of this knowledge.

Until one day I saw a video of young people gathered in then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's office, wearing black shirts with yellow text declaring “We have a right to good jobs and a livable future,” and holding signs that read “We Have 12 Years. What's Your Plan?” and “Step Up or Step Aside.” And they were *singing*. “*Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.*”

These young people were not giving up. They were *fighting*. Hundreds of them risked arrest to fight for the future they knew they deserved. And it was *joyful*. I knew I had to be involved. These were my people.

There wasn't a Sunrise Movement hub in Portland yet, so I contacted the only other climate justice organization that I knew of, 350PDX, and started attending every meeting, event, and action that I heard of. Finally, I was surrounded by people who were wide awake to what was happening, and they were doing all they could to stop it. For the first time in months, I felt hopeful.

After a few months, some of us younger folks in 350PDX started a Sunrise Movement hub. Those first months were a whirlwind, with every spare minute devoted to the movement. Each of us brought different skills to our work and the community that we built was joyful and powerful. Within months, it seemed every politician in our state was afraid of us.

And they should be. In 2019, we worked with other organizations to bring 20,000 Portlanders into the streets as part of an international climate strike, demanding that politicians take action on the climate crisis. After protesters marched through the streets of Portland, they ended at a climate festival to attend talks and trainings and find their home in this movement.

Don't get me wrong, it wasn't perfect or easy. There were personality clashes, disagreements, and power struggles. Organizing is hard work and people do it for free, so we wanted our meetings to feel *welcoming* and *fun*. We had parties and community events, and we opened and closed each meeting by singing. Singing is magic. It connects you to your courage and purpose and helps you rise above all the crap that gets in the way.

Everyone has a right to a stable climate and a livable future. Young people know that we will live with the consequences of the choices being made right now. If politicians aren't going to protect life on Earth, then we will vote them out. But we need a mass mobilization of people working together. We need to remember who our true enemies are: the fossil fuel billionaires who sell our future for profit and the politicians who they buy. And we need to remember who our allies are: all people working for justice, equity, and a livable planet. We don't need to be perfect. We just need to show up.

Norman Rogers

Los Angeles

Second Vice President, United Steelworkers Local 675

I've worked at a Los Angeles oil refinery for more than 22 years as a member of United Steelworkers Local 675. Our union represents thousands of workers who operate refineries, oil wells, pipelines, and terminals. The work we do fuels grocery trips, delivery trucks, and even creates the materials used to make the tests and syringes that have been crucial against COVID-19.

Not a day goes by that I'm not reminded that the future of jobs like mine is not secure. I see more and more electric cars on the streets. Many of the red terracotta roofs where I live are now covered by solar panels. Each year, new laws ban oil drilling and gas stoves. When I scroll through the news on my phone, I even see ads from the oil company I work for boasting about funding offshore wind turbine farms.

My father always said, "Failing to plan is planning to fail." I know that our economy is transitioning *away* from fossil fuels. It has to. The burning of fossil fuels needs to end in order to have an ecologically sustainable future. I get it. But while this transition may be inevitable, a *just transition* — one that takes into account workers like me — is not.

There is a great deal of division among fossil fuel workers about climate change. At the heart of this division is fear. What happens to our jobs if we stop using fossil fuels? If I lose my job, how am I going to feed my kids? Will our family lose our house? Will we be forced to move? Fear does not like change.

And workers like me have good reason to be afraid. Years ago, I remember sitting on the couch and watching President Bill Clinton sign into law the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA. He said that globalization was changing the world, and that the U.S. economy needed to change with it. He promised more than a million new jobs. He promised economic prosperity. I believed him. So did a lot of other people. Until our factories started closing. My brother became one of the more than 1 million workers who lost their jobs because of NAFTA, when his air conditioning plant moved to Monterrey, Mexico. Meanwhile, the company he worked for continued to make millions. So I don't believe politicians' promises.

I know that without a plan, workers will yet again be sacrificed in the name of profits and progress. That's why I've started to work in my union to fight for what we call a just transition. A just transition means that workers like me, and other vulnerable people, do not bear the burden of the costs of creating a sustainable economy. We should not be sacrificed in the name of a supposedly better future. Better for who? A just transition also means holding companies accountable when they make decisions that harm the communities where they operate.

Unions have a rich history of fighting for workers; the same must hold true now as we move to a fossil-free future. That's why my union, in addition to fighting for higher wages and stronger workplace safety standards, also demands that oil companies commit to a plan to decarbonize. And my union has teamed up with workers across California — including janitors, teachers, and nurses — to create a plan for what a just transition to a fossil-free future would look like.

Just imagine a world where workers are not held hostage by their fossil fuel jobs, but instead are paid to learn how to build the infrastructure for new solar- and wind-farms. Or they could be paid to build new roads, bridges, and levees, which will all be needed because of drier summers and wetter winters. Or they could be paid to become energy auditors and retrofitters for buildings small and large. Now imagine that those workers continue to have healthcare and secure retirement, but have access to high quality and tuition-free colleges. This means California would need to train and hire more teachers, more nurses and doctors, more electricians, carpenters, engineers, and architects — all low-carbon jobs. And all of these jobs would be guaranteed to be living wage jobs, available to everyone.

Any bold vision for climate justice will require workers and their unions. Unions have the potential, and the responsibility, to advance the cause of a transition that is just. They must help ensure that workers, and their communities, receive a fair deal.

Tiana Caldwell
Kansas City, Missouri
Kansas City Tenants

“Home is where the heart is.”

Pause and think about that statement. Think about the heart’s role in sustaining life — and what it would mean to lose one’s home, to be evicted. For me, this is not theoretical, but personal.

I know what it’s like to lose my home and to feel like I am losing my life.

I am the descendent of enslaved people. I grew up in rural poverty in Parsons, Kansas. I am the daughter and granddaughter of veterans who, because they were Black, did not benefit from the G.I. Bill and its low-cost mortgages — which cleared a pathway to homeownership and wealth for millions of white Americans.

I was in my second bout of ovarian cancer in 2019 when I fell behind on my rent. My landlord evicted me, my husband, and my 13-year-old son. We became homeless, living in a hotel for six months. We were just getting back on our feet and found a place to live when the pandemic hit. I was laid off from my community college teaching job; my husband was laid off too. Now we face eviction. Again.

I shouldn’t have to go through this. Neither should my 13-year-old son.

I helped found Kansas City Tenants (KC Tenants) because *no person* should have to choose between paying for their cancer treatment and keeping a roof over their head. Being a “tenant” means you’re at the mercy of your landlord. Even if you *can* afford rent, too often you hand over your paycheck for an apartment with toxic lead paint, a leaking roof, poisonous mold, and crawling with vermin. Our organization is led by a multigenerational, multiracial, anti-racist group of poor and working-class tenants. We organize to ensure that everyone in our community (and across the country) has a safe, accessible, and affordable home.

Right now, that goal — good housing for all — is out of reach because the system is broken. A full-time worker earning minimum wage cannot afford a two-bedroom apartment in *any* county — urban, suburban, or rural — in the United States. There is a massive shortage of low-cost housing. More than half a million families and individuals are on the street, in a shelter, or living in their car while millions more live one medical

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bill, flat tire, or natural disaster away from homelessness. Who are the most vulnerable to being unhoused or evicted? Black communities and other people of color, seniors, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ people. It has only gotten worse during the pandemic.

Just now I said, “The system is broken.” But that’s not quite right. The system is broken for people like me, but it is working as designed for the rich. The vast majority of housing in this country is privately owned — by individuals and corporations. Rich people and corporations don’t have an incentive to increase the supply of affordable housing, since they continue to make huge profits leaving things as they are.

We want housing for all, not just for the rich.

KC Tenants is part of a national movement of local housing organizations calling for a “Homes Guarantee.” That is just what it sounds like. We want the federal government to ensure that no one is denied the fundamental human right to a safe place to live.

And here’s what I want to make clear: Housing for all isn’t about being *kind* or taking pity on poor people; it isn’t charity. A society that guarantees housing for all will be fairer, healthier, happier, and is key to addressing the climate emergency that threatens *all* of us.

The only path to human survival is to stop burning fossil fuels, immediately and completely. Because transportation is the single largest contributor to U.S. greenhouse gas emissions — and individual car trips are the largest driver of transportation emissions — how and where we build our homes matters. In the future that I am organizing for there will be plenty of low-cost housing, public transportation, safe and beautiful bike paths, and accessible sidewalks.

If we build livable neighborhoods for *the people*, rather than only for the rich, we can transform cities and the economy. We can build every new home — and update old ones — to the highest possible environmental standard, provide good, unionized, green jobs in construction, and return wealth stolen from Black and Brown neighborhoods. Those are the neighborhoods that have borne the greatest brunt of pollution, climate change, and housing and labor exploitation.

Home is indeed where the heart is. Making sure that every person — every single one of us — has a safe and healthy place to call home must be at the heart of any plan to ensure a livable planet.



Sharon Lavigne

[Rise St. James](#), Fifth District, St. James Parish, Louisiana

Growing up, I lived the American Dream. My family lived off bountiful farmland in St. James Parish, Louisiana. We had clean air. Clean water. Soil that could grow anything. We owned our own land, a 40-acre farm passed down to my parents from my grandparents. Nearby was Freetown, one of many Black settlements founded by formerly enslaved people that dotted the banks of the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

I now own the same 40-acre farm I grew up on. My house, my church, my relatives and neighbors — everything else that I consider home are here. But my home is no longer the dream I remember. It's become more like living on Death Row.

But unlike Death Row, there was no jury, no judge, and no crime. No, what's killing us is the pollution from the oil, gas, and plastics plants that now surround St. James Parish.

St. James is in the middle of what many call Cancer Alley. For decades, oil, gas, chemicals, and plastics companies moved into this region. Now 150 factories are located within an 85-mile radius, one for every 656 residents. Our once beautiful farmland is now boxed in by plants that spew acrid smells and irritate our eyes, sinuses, and skin.

These factories are concentrated in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Where I live, and where 86 percent of the population is Black, there are 12 petrochemical plants — one for every 235 residents. We face major health issues from the toxic emissions. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, cancer rates for African Americans in this region are 50 times higher than the national average.

I've seen my neighbors get sick, die, or move away. We used to have grocery stores, a family doctor who made house calls, restaurants, and post offices. Many businesses were Black-owned. Today, all that's left is a little shack that sells sno-balls (snowcones). The closest grocery store is a Walmart 12 miles away. Our beloved Freetown is now reduced to a single road by a steady invasion of oil tanks.

There is no buffer zone between us and the plants. We — the mostly Black residents — are the buffer zone. It's killing us.

When the chemical company Wanhau proposed construction of a new plastics plant in 2018, I had enough. My neighbors — even my brother — talked of leaving. I prayed,

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“Dear God, do you want me to give up my land, my home? What do you want me to do?”
Then a bird flew into my yard: “No,” he said, “Fight.”

Taking inspiration from my father, a local NAACP leader, I started organizing my neighbors. I had no experience as an activist, but I found that others wanted to fight for our community too. We were tired of being forced to live in toxic places because of the color of our skin. We founded Rise St. James, a faith-based grassroots organization fighting for environmental justice.

We began to educate our community about the damage a new plant would do. We made flyers, bought billboard ads, and wrote letters to local leaders. Then we started working with other groups, such as 350 New Orleans, Extinction Rebellion, and the Poor People’s Campaign. We led demonstrations, like “The March Against Death Valley,” a five-day march from New Orleans to Baton Rouge.

After months of campaigning, Wanhua decided not to build the plastic plant. Our organizing prevented more than 100 million pounds of toxic waste from being released. But with 36 still operating nearby, we knew we had more work to do. The most important victory was that people in our community spoke up, felt powerful, and were fighting for clean air, clean water, clean soil. Fighting for our home.

While we celebrated, another chemical plant, Formosa Petrochemical, announced that it would build a plastics factory a mile from my home, directly on the site of a burial ground of formerly enslaved people.

Climate change makes our fight against these toxic plants even more urgent. For one, stronger storms like Hurricane Ida threaten the levees that protect us from the mighty Mississippi. A break to the levee system or an extreme rain event, could turn these plants into toxic bombs. And new oil-based factories will only add to the carbon emissions worsening our global climate crisis.

The same people’s power that stopped Wanhau can stop Formosa. I don’t care what nobody says. The governor, anyone. I’m not afraid. God told me that Formosa is not going to build this plant in our backyard. I believe Rise St. James is like David and we’re going up against a big ol’ Goliath — and we’re going to win.