



AL SEIB Los Angeles Times

A POLL found that 52% of Latinos and 46% of Black people are willing to pay more for solar and wind energy.

A ‘GASLIGHT’ CAMPAIGN FOR FOSSIL FUELS

How the industry seeks to cast itself as an ally of communities most harmed by climate change.

By Sammy Roth

The letter to Mexico’s energy minister offered a glowing review of a fossil fuel project in Baja California.

Writing in July, three U.S. governors and the chair of the Ute Indian Tribe praised the Energía Costa Azul project — which was seeking approval from the Mexican government — as “one of the most promising [liquefied natural gas] export facilities on the Pacific Coast.”

The letter was arranged by Western States and Tribal Nations, an advocacy group that says it was created in part to “promote tribal self-determination” by creating easier access to overseas markets for gas extracted from Native American lands.

But internal documents shared with The Times reveal that the group’s main financial backers are county governments and fossil fuel companies — including a subsidiary of San Diego-based Sempra Energy, which received approval this month to build the \$1.9-billion facility in Baja. In fact, the group has just one tribal member, the Ute Indian Tribe.

Western States and Tribal Nations isn’t the only effort by fossil fuel proponents to cast themselves as allies of communities of color and defenders of their financial well-being.

The goal is to bulwark oil and gas against ambitious climate change policies by claiming the moral high ground — even as those fuels kindle a global crisis that disproportionately harms people who aren’t white.

Recent examples abound.

As protests rocked the United States after the police killing of George Floyd, a government relations firm whose clients include oil and gas companies told news media that the mayor of San Luis Obispo was “getting a lot of heat” from the NAACP over a proposal to limit gas hookups in new buildings. That was proved false when the local NAACP chapter said it supported the policy.

Around the same time, Alaska’s all-Republican congressional delegation wrote a letter to federal officials complaining about the refusal of several banks to finance oil and gas drilling in the Arctic, writing that the banks were harming Alaska Natives by “openly discriminating against investment in some of the most economically disadvantaged regions of America.”

Some of the most contentious debates involve natural gas. The fuel is less polluting than coal, but an international team of scientists reported last year that planet-warming emissions from gas are rising faster than coal emissions are falling.

Gas companies say their product is cleaner than coal and will only get cleaner as they blend renewable fuels into their pipelines. Gas also benefits low-income families by keeping energy prices low, supporters say.

In recent months, California officials have faced criticism from some lawmakers and Black and Latino groups who say the state has focused too much on reducing pollution and not enough on the economic effects of climate policies.

“It’s not enough to continue to say, ‘Poor people want zero-emission cars.’ That’s the farthest thing from their mind,” state Sen. Steven Bradford (D-Gardena), who is Black, told the California Air Resources Board during a hearing on race and equity last month.

Natural gas advocates also say eliminating the fuel would require people to give up their gas stoves. Sempra subsidiary Southern California Gas Co. has seized on this idea, using gas cooking as a talking point to foster opposition to all-electric building policies, which have been passed by nearly 40 cities and counties.

Fossil fuel companies are ignoring the ways communities of color and low-income families are disproportionately harmed by polluted air and water, deadlier heat waves, more punishing droughts and other consequences of burning coal, oil and gas, said Leah Stokes, a UC Santa Barbara political scientist.

The national uprising over racial justice and the COVID-19 pandemic have shone a spotlight on those injustices. Black and Latino people are more likely to suffer from the virus, and research suggests that greater exposure to air pollution may be one reason why.

“There’s definitely a marketing campaign to gaslight everybody, literally gaslight them, by saying, ‘If we do the [clean energy] transition, it’s going to harm front-line Black, Hispanic and Indigenous communities,’” Stokes said.

Pitch: ‘prosperity,’ ‘self-determination’

For decades, energy companies built polluting power plants in communities of color and extracted fossil fuels from tribal lands with little regard for local health effects. Today, they’re making the case that their products are good for the pocketbooks of people of color.

The main purpose of Western States and Tribal Nations is lobbying for gas export terminals. The group says on its website that many tribal nations “seek economic prosperity and tribal self-determination through natural gas.”

Western States and Tribal Nations members

States	Counties	Companies	Other
Baja California (Mexico)	Converse (Wyoming)	Caerus Energy	Seven County Infrastructure Coalition (Utah)
New Mexico	Duchesne (Utah)	Dominion Energy	Ute Indian Tribe
Utah	Garfield (Colorado)	Laramie Energy	Wyoming Coalition of Local Governments
Wyoming	Moffat (Colorado)	Sempra LNG	
	Mesa (Colorado)	Terra Energy	
	Rio Blanco (Colorado)	TYR Group	
	Uintah (Utah)		

Source: Western States and Tribal Nations

Sammy Roth / Los Angeles Times

“The Ute Indian Tribe primarily funds its government through its oil and gas revenue,” the group says.

Internal documents obtained through public records requests by the Energy and Policy Institute, a pro-renewables watchdog organization, show that all but one of the group’s members are state and local government agencies or energy companies.

In addition to Sempra, corporate backers include Virginia-based Dominion Energy, which stands to benefit from West Coast export terminals because it owns a gas exploration and production firm with operations in several western states.

Bryson Hull — a vice president at HBW Resources, the Houston-based consulting firm that runs Western States and Tribal Nations — said in an email that the group is “organized and led by state, county and sovereign tribal governments to help aid rural economic development.” He said membership “naturally includes the companies whose investments will make that happen.”

Ute officials declined to comment for this story. They asked that all questions be directed to Western States and Tribal Nations.

Hull said the Ute tribe — which has about 3,000 members, many of whom live on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah — “explicitly asked for ‘Tribal Nations’ to be included in the organization’s name to reflect the fact that they and other tribes are sovereign nations under the law.”

The Utes aren’t the only tribe whose leaders see fossil fuels as an economic imperative. At the same time, Indigenous climate activists have become an increasingly powerful force in recent years, protesting pipelines and demanding cleaner energy.

To Kyle Whyte, a professor of environment and sustainability at the University of Michigan and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, the existence of a group like Western States and Tribal Nations is no surprise. He said there’s a “long history of energy companies and energy interests trying to make connections with tribal sovereignty.”

“There’s this misconception that if tribes could do fracking and burn coal and there were no limits or regulation or anything, that they would just do it, that that’s the economy we’ve always wanted. And that’s just not true,” Whyte said.

In Oregon, Western States and Tribal Nations urged officials to support the proposed Jordan Cove gas export terminal, despite opposition from several tribes in the Pacific North-



Sempra Energy

AN AERIAL VIEW of Sempra Energy's Cameron liquefied natural gas facility on the Gulf Coast in Hackberry, La., in 2019.

west.

Nowhere in the group's media blitz did it mention it had previously received funding from Pembina Pipeline Corp., the Canadian company behind the \$10-billion project.

Hull confirmed the company was a member in 2019 but said it didn't renew this year.

"Whether Pembina is a member or not, WSTN has and will continue to advocate for the Jordan Cove [liquefied natural gas] project because it's one of the few economically viable options for West Coast natural gas exports," he said.

Pembina didn't respond to requests for comments. Neither did Dominion.

"As a general matter, we support bringing domestic natural gas resources to global energy markets," Paty Ortega Mitchell, a spokeswoman for Sempra's liquefied natural gas subsidiary, said in an email.

Industry's financial contributions

Member companies with over \$1 billion in revenue, such as Dominion and Sempra, are expected to provide just \$20,000 annually to Western States and Tribal Nations, internal documents show.

Still, small expenditures can have an effect — either to build support or to preempt opposition.

Take Pacoima Beautiful, which fights for cleaner air in the mostly Latino, low-income northeast San Fernando Valley. Between 2014 and 2018, the environmental justice group took \$107,750 from Sempra subsidiary SoCalGas.

In August 2016, Pacoima Beautiful's executive director, Veronica Padilla, wrote a letter to state officials in support of reopening the gas company's Aliso Canyon storage facility, which a year earlier had sprung the worst methane leak in U.S. history.

Padilla now says she was reluctantly doing the company's bidding. Eventually her group stopped accepting SoCalGas funding, and today it's pushing Los Angeles officials to shut down a gas plant whose fuel is supplied by SoCalGas. The city-owned plant recently leaked methane for at least three years, raising concerns about potential health effects to nearby residents.

"Other environmental justice groups continue to take the [gas company] money and say, 'Let's do something good with their money.' But I think it's important for us to take a stand and just say no," Padilla said.

SoCalGas representatives urged Pacoima Beautiful to reconsider, Padilla said. She recalled a gas company employee discussing efforts to replace gas stoves with electric alternatives, and asking her: "How are people going to warm up their tortillas?"



Sempra Energy

SEMPRA'S Energía Costa Azul facility in Baja California, Mexico, can already accept natural gas imports. The company hopes to upgrade the facility to allow for export of liquefied natural gas.

“That was so disturbing to me,” she said.

SoCalGas representatives declined to comment on Padilla’s account or answer any other questions for this story.

Two SoCalGas executives did, however, send a letter to The Times’ owner and executive editor suggesting questions posed by the newspaper smacked of racism.

The Oct. 23 letter was signed by gas company vice presidents Mitch Mitchell and Andy Carrasco.

The Times, they wrote, “has repeatedly asked us, and our community partners, if our support for their work involves some sort of quid pro quo. Not surprisingly, these questions seem pointedly directed at Black, Latino, and Native American organizations.

“Our support for many community partners dates back decades, as do our relationships with community leaders across Southern California,” they wrote. “And yes, we speak from life experience as men of color, one African-American and one Latino.

“We share the goals of helping California decarbonize and move to a cleaner energy future,” they added.

SoCalGas has worked to bring nonwhite voices to its cause, seeking out Latino leaders to support a pro-gas advocacy group it helped create and recruiting Latino and Asian American politicians to its campaign for natural-gas-fueled trucks at the L.A. and Long Beach ports.

The fossil fuel industry’s financial assistance and efforts to build support aren’t limited to communities of color. SoCalGas made \$7.7 million in charitable and noncharitable contributions last year.

Those contributions included \$10,500 to the American Indian Chamber of Commerce of California, \$10,000 to the California Latino Leadership Institute and \$28,000 to the Greater Los Angeles African American Chamber of Commerce — all of which wrote letters supporting a SoCalGas proposal that would bolster the company’s preferred climate solution, renewable gas.

Tracy Stanhoff, president of the American Indian Chamber of Commerce of California, said many American Indians and Alaska Natives can’t afford higher energy bills or don’t have



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

ANDRES RAMIREZ is the policy director of Pacoima Beautiful, an environmental justice group in the Valley that has stopped taking funding from SoCalGas.

access to modern energy infrastructure.

“We are for clean energy, don’t get me wrong. We’re stewards of the land,” Stanhoff said.

Gas companies are presenting a “false choice” between clean power and affordable power, said Carmelita Miller, who leads the energy equity program at the Oakland-based Greenlining Institute. The group argued in a report last year that shifting to all-electric homes can benefit low-income families by creating good-paying jobs and reducing indoor air pollution from gas stoves.

“Our people deserve to live in an environment that is clean and pollution-free,” Miller said.

Who speaks for people of color?

As California officials ramped up efforts to phase out gas appliances and oil-powered cars in recent months, a group called United Latinos Vote pushed back.

The California Environmental Justice Alliance and a member of Congress, Rep. Nanette Barragan (D-San Pedro), questioned who was funding the Berkeley-based advocacy group — especially as its arguments were echoed by fossil fuel proponents.

United Latinos Vote made its first public foray into climate policy in San Luis Obispo, where its executive director, Robert Apodaca, wrote that a plan to promote all-electric buildings would “disproportionately impact vulnerable communities and communities of color.”

The group also bought a full-page ad in The Times, which said policies favored by climate activists would “hurt the real people and communities we represent.”

“There are a lot of inequities in the world, and now the poor people are being penalized,” Apodaca said in an interview.

But groups such as the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network say the claims made by United Latinos Vote don’t represent the majority of their communities.

A poll conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California over the summer found that 52% of Latinos and 46% of Black people are willing to pay more for solar and wind energy, compared with 42% of white people.

Additionally, 70% of Latinos and 65% of Black people said stricter environmental laws and



AL SEIB Los Angeles Times

HOMES overlook the Inglewood Oil Field in the Los Angeles area.

regulations are worth the cost, compared with 53% of white people.

Gladys Limon, executive director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, called United Latinos Vote an “industry interest group that describes itself as equity-based and cloaks itself by stealing the racial justice language of the movement.”

It’s not clear who’s funding United Latinos Vote, although the group’s political action committee recently received \$3,400 each from two major oil and gas companies, Chevron and Phillips 66. Apodaca said the gas industry isn’t funding his group’s energy advocacy, but he declined to clarify who is, saying only that backers include “various industries.”

United Latinos Vote’s arguments have been amplified in email blasts and on social media by a SoCalGas-funded advocacy group and by Frank Maisano, a media specialist at the Houston-based government relations firm Bracewell LLP who works with SoCalGas.

It was also Maisano who falsely claimed the NAACP opposed San Luis Obispo’s all-electric buildings plan. He blamed “several sources” who turned out to be wrong, although he wouldn’t say if he was acting on behalf of a particular client.

Even though it wasn’t the case in San Luis Obispo, it’s not uncommon for NAACP chapters to receive fossil fuel money and go to bat for policies favored by the industry.

The national NAACP released a report last year titled “Fossil Fueled Foolery,” listing the “top 10 manipulation tactics of the fossil fuel industry” and warning local chapters not to fall for them.

The report is unequivocal: When fossil fuel companies “make the case that the benefits of using fossil fuels far outweigh the harms” — or are caught “leveraging their wealth to create a false appearance of community support” — don’t believe them.