

Consumer power v. climate change

Tim Root welcomes the 10:10 campaign but says boycotts will have greater impact

In December world leaders will meet in Copenhagen to try and agree a deal to reduce climate change. If they fail, extreme weather will cause increasing devastation, and food production will fall behind population growth. In the coming decades millions of people will have to leave their home region and severe conflict will result. The most constructive action we can take now to prevent this is to build support for the London march on 5 December (www.the-wave.org.uk), and ask everyone we know to sign the global petition backed by organisations including Greenpeace, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Amnesty International, and Avaaz: (<http://tckctckctck.org/people/i-am-ready>). One and a half million people have already signed it, and therefore it is likely to generate the publicity needed to have a significant impact.

Regardless of the outcome of Copenhagen, governments will need continual reminders that citizens expect them to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Politicians usually neglect such complex problems when no election is imminent. An effective strategy both to reduce emissions and to generate pressure for more comprehensive government action would be consumer boycotts of products which cause climate change the most. Boycotts have a long record of success, and business leaders consider them more effective than other campaign tactics. Boycotts of the banks which invested most heavily in apartheid South Africa made an important contribution to the regime's demise. Recently four of the world's largest cattle companies yielded to a Greenpeace demand to stop buying cattle from deforested Amazonia, showing the power of fear of a potential boycott.

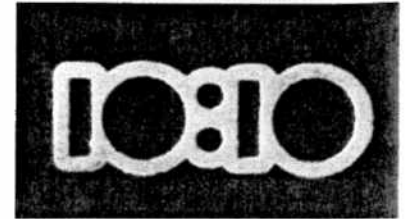
Boycotts do not need enormous support; only a small minority of consumers need to boycott a company or product for its profits and competitiveness to take a significant hit. They can win the support of those who would be unlikely to go on a demonstration, possibly because they doubt whether giving up their time would be worthwhile. However many such people are willing

with minimal inconvenience not to buy certain products, gaining satisfaction from expressing their principles. For most people, striking an immediate economic hit on a major polluter is much more appealing than a politician-focused action whose results will not be known for a considerable time. With careful choice of language, boycotts could highlight the evil of the most guilty climate destroyers, focusing personally on the chief executives to dramatise the issue.

Effective boycotts would also galvanise politicians, particularly when hitting demand for exports. Boycotts would indicate not only the breadth of support for tackling climate change but also our determination to show our concern regularly through our purchasing choices. The boycott would warn all businesses that they could lose market share to less polluting competitors, and would spur well-intentioned companies to demand an inter-governmental deal so their polluting competitors could not gain an unfair advantage.

I propose boycotts focused on three particularly appalling sources of emissions. The Athabasca Tar Sands in Canada are the world's second largest deposit of oil. Production there is set to expand three to five fold by 2020. Extracting the oil requires huge amounts of energy, causing much greater carbon dioxide emissions than ordinary oil. It is the most extreme climate crime. An international boycott of companies such as Shell, BP, and Royal Bank of Scotland, major investors in the tar sands, could win massive support. And as the Canadian and American governments are promoting or facilitating development of the tar sands, and deriving tax revenue from it, the boycott should also target certain Canadian and American exports. This would gain enormous publicity. We could be reasonably confident of success as many North Americans oppose tar sands oil; there have been attempts in the United States Congress and the US conference of mayors to stop American public bodies buying it.

The second group of glaring criminals suitable for boycott are the large coal companies and



their investors. The eminent climatologist James Hansen has called coal-fired power stations "death factories" due to coal producing much greater CO2 emissions than other fossil fuels. A coal boycott could soon lead to companies competing for customers by pledging to supply electricity not generated from coal.

The third boycott target should be the major companies responsible for deforestation, which causes about a quarter of all green house gas emissions. Millions of people feel devotion towards tropical forests not only as their destruction would worsen climate change, but because of their remarkable biodiversity. Forests have been the source of several important medicines, and are home to thousands of undiscovered species, many likely to provide economic benefits.

The excellent 10:10 campaign, inspiring many people and companies to cut their emissions by 10% by the end of 2010, may appear a promising strategy. However many people or companies can achieve a 10% cut through quite simple changes, avoiding careless use of fuel. Cutting beyond 10% to the levels science tells us are required needs much greater investment and planning. Moreover recent research shows that many people are resistant to calls to change their lifestyle. They are sceptical about cutting their emissions when most people are not doing so. Due to distrust of politicians, they are cynical about green taxes. A boycott campaign is much more likely than 10:10 to overcome these pitfalls, as it gives people the chance to express their anger at the corporate greed which threatens life on earth. This will be the most effective way to build support for various tactics to pressure governments and industry to make the large-scale investments in energy efficiency and renewables which are needed for human survival.

There is a fully referenced version of this article at www.timroot.net tim@timroot.net

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