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Indiana Utility Chooses Solar and Storage Over Coal: An Ecological Transformation Starts to Emerge?

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Global Research, September 24, 2018

Region: USA
Theme: Environment, Oil and Energy

On September 20th, Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO) announced it plans to replace all its coal generation with solar and wind and energy storage in the next ten years for its 460,000 customers in 32 Indiana counties.

> "This creates a vision for the future that is better for our customers," said NIPSCO president Violet Sistovaris. "It's consistent with our goal to transition to the best cost, cleanest electric supply mix available while maintaining reliability, diversity and flexibility for technology and market changes."

This is despite Trump administration efforts to roll back the Obama administration Clean Power Plan, and ongoing efforts to subsidize coal fired plants as somehow vital to "grid security".

The simple fact is that coal cannot compete economically or ecologically with zero fuel cost and minimally polluting solar, wind and energy storage. The global movement away from coal and toward renewables is accelerating, driven by ecological and economic imperatives.

By June 2018, before NIPSCO and other coal closing announcements, 19.8 gigawatts of U.S. coal capacity was already scheduled to close in ten years. A survey of the 16 largest U.S. utilities already found 7 were planning to invest billions in renewables and storage and move away completely or very substantially from coal.

An Emergent Ecological Future?

Of course, it remains unclear if our efforts to reduce carbon pollution will be enough to escape climate disaster. But it is also apparent that the accelerating movement way from coal internationally reflects an important and emergent trend of moving from a self-destructive global industrialism to an ecologically sustainable future that can persist for geological time scales.

When the President of an Indiana coal utility speaks about a renewable "transition to the best cost, cleanest electric supply mix available" we are not just talking to the Sierra Club.

An ecological future, if it is to emerge, must be based, first, on economic growth meaning ecological improvement as the consequence of the pursuit of profit. That's sustainability in motion.

Sustainability is more than just another way to make money. It is a way to seek profit and at the same time do so within the context of sustainable conduct ecologically. To fully close

the circle we need to include the pursuit of social and ecological justice as an essential concomitant for economic growth in addition to making profit mean ecological improvement.

This can be institutionalized by a redefinition by law of fiduciary responsibility making the pursuit of economic growth to mean ecological improvement as well as social and ecological justice to be supported by law, regulation and fiscal policy. These can include steps such as a negative income tax or basic income, ecological regulation, ecological tax systems that send clear price signals that make sustainable goods and services less costly, gain market share, and become more profitable.

An Ecological Civilization

An ecological civilization is humanity acting to make economic growth mean the improvement of the ecosphere to maintain a self-renewing balance. An ecological civilization is based on diverse lifeways sustaining linked natural and social ecologies.

A ecological civilization is driven by social and ecological necessity.The alternative is business and pillage as usual driving us to ecological catastrophe and the collapse of civilization. An ecological transition is guided by three generative forces: sustainability, emergence and co-evolution.

Sustainability is the ability of life, the ecosphere, to respond to all influences in ways that shape the planet making it maximally suitable for all life. Sustainability is the mechanism that allowed life to withstand repeated mass extinction events and once again thrive. Sustainability will act similarly in the face of the extinction event of the Anthropocene. What is different in the 21st century is that human self-consciousness and social choice have become part of the mechanism of sustainability, a deliberate and healing social response to industrial excess.

Emergence is the sudden appearance of new forms and forces given sufficient levels of complexity, for example, appearance of solid matter in a mostly empty quantum universe given a sufficient number of atoms. Life itself is an emergent phenomena. An ecological civilization will be yet a further expression of emergent phenomena.

Industrialism in action is simplification with a focus on mass production and unlimited pollution and ecological destruction An ecological system is characterized by customized production and zero pollution and zero waste, and increasing complexity where the output of all systems become input for other processes and products. Social complexity is the basis for the emergence of sophisticated cybernetic feedback control loops to moderate actions toward ecological ends.

Co-evolution is the interaction of life and planet, the operation of multiple forces of evolution on all scales including variation, symbiosis, competition, cooperation on scales ranging from genetic to social. It was Darwin, after all, who understood the evolutionary importance of human society and its actions.

Sustainability and emergence and co-evolution are fractal in their action, operating broadly similarly on all scales from pond to planet, much as Mandelbrot sets governing the varied ragged shape of coast lines are similar whether viewed from space or on micro-scale.

The Future?

An ecological future is an emergent prospect and possibility. Its full manifestation is a matter of social choice and social action. It would be a pity if an ecological civilization is left to appear after the collapse of civilization in the 21st century in the face of hundreds of thousands of years of ecological disruption before the climate returns to friendlier norms as it finally did after the eocene thermal maximum was finally ended abut 50 million years ago by enormous mats of plants thriving in then hot arctic ocean pulling gigatons upon gigatons of carbon dioxide form atmosphere and ocean.

The successor Trumpism can be a not a return to business and pollution as usual, but the embrace of ecological means for prosperity, and for social and ecological justice for all.

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Roy Morrison's latest book is Building An Ecological Civilization: Outline for Getting from Here to There, forthcoming in 2019.

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