

Chicagoans demand coal plants' regulation

by Karen Looney
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On September 24, over 100 Chicagoans took to the streets, travelling on bicycle and foot in the Roll Beyond Coal rally. Participants rode bikes from Daley Plaza down to a park near Fisk coal plant in Pilsen. Here they joined others in a neighborhood march demanding clean, renewable energy alternatives to polluting coal and supporting emission regulations for coal plants Crawford and Fisk. The event took place on the International Day of Climate Action, a day that encouraged humanity to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and find solutions to the climate crisis. It was one of more than 2000 events in over 175 nations on the 24th striving to move our planet forward into a clean energy future.

Many national and community groups attended the protest, shouting bilingual chants in the largely Latino neighborhood. Representatives of the Pilsen Alliance, Pilsen Environmental Rights & Reform Organization (PERRO), and Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) made speeches. They called for Midwest Generation, owner of Crawford and Fisk, to invest in renewable energy, such as solar and wind, and to either reduce emissions or shut down their two aging coal plants that lie in residential areas within city limits.

Maria Trejo, 51, joined the march in honor of her three asthmatic nieces, who also reside in Pilsen. "They've taken so many days off school and many times were even rushed to the emergency room because they couldn't breathe. It's really serious." Trejo's family was at first afraid there may have been mold in their home causing the girls' symptoms. Soon they became aware of similar illness in several neighbors. It was not long before Trejo determined the looming Fisk smokestack as the probable cause.

When coal is burned to power electricity-generation turbines, it emits by-products of nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide, mercury, and fine soot particulates. Studies have found coal power emissions to contribute to lung cancer, cardiopulmonary disease, heart attacks, acute and chronic bronchitis, asthma and respiratory illness, and premature death. A recent Harvard Medical study found that pollutions from Crawford and Fisk cause over 40 deaths, 550 emergency room visits, and 2800 asthma attacks each year in Chicago. Midwest Generation argues that this study was based on data from 1999, the year the company first acquired the plants, and that upgrades they funded to reduce emissions had not yet been put in place. A more current study by the National Research Council, based on 2005 emissions, estimated the annual cost of health and environmental damages caused by these two plants at over \$127 million. The residents who live closest to the plants are largely low income, raising concerns about the affordability of health care for coal-related incidents. Coal combustion also produces considerable amounts of greenhouse gases, a key factor in climate change.

The Crawford and Fisk coal power plants opened in 1924 and 1903 respectively. Midwest Generation purchased the plants from ComEd in 1999 and has since been making upgrades to modernize them. In 2006, the state of Illinois reached an agreement with Midwest Generation to participate in a ten year plan to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by 70% by 2012 and sulfur dioxide by 80% by 2018. Four years into the plan, the plants have already made dramatic improvements as well as decreased their mercury emissions 90% from 1999 levels.

Despite the ongoing reductions, Crawford and Fisk still emit far more fine particulate matter and carbon dioxide emissions than modern coal plant designs, with their particulate matter emissions currently exceeding federal health standards. The antiquated plants are exempted from certain state and federal emissions regulations due to a grandfather clause. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan has found thousands of violations by these plants of the U.S. Clean Air Act and is presently joined with the Obama Administration in a lawsuit against Midwest Generation. Over 300,000 people live within three miles of the plants, more than any other coal plant in the country.

One of these residents, Leila Mendez, describes her battles with illness, almost certainly caused by pollution from Crawford and Fisk. "The doctors were baffled," said Leila, member of PERRO, in reference to her struggle with a rare, aggressive tumor in 1998. "There was no cancer in my family. I was vegetarian, never drank alcoholic beverages, no coffee, not even Coca-Cola." It was not until much later when she attended local meetings that she grew aware of the data surrounding the effects of Fisk emissions. "They almost killed me. I'm lucky to be alive."

The protest was timely given the current committee discussions of a proposed Chicago Clean Power Ordinance that may move on to City Council for vote. If voted into law, the ordinance would force Chicago's coal plants to reduce particulate matter by 90% within one year and carbon dioxide emissions by 50% within three years. These limits would likely push the plants to either switch to natural gas power or shut down. The ordinance needs 26 votes to become law. Currently, 35 of 50 Aldermen co-sponsor the ordinance. Mayor Rahm Emanuel has also given vocal support. "We are paying a health care cost as a city because of the plants," he said. "I want them as a company to be a responsible citizen to the people of the city of Chicago."

Over the course of the campaign for clean power, Midwest Generation has staunchly defended its practices. They believe that, should the plants be shut down, the subsequent energy loss may require Chicago to seek electricity from out of state where pollution laws are not as stringent. This could lead to increased air pollution in the Chicago area. Members of PERRO and Greenpeace devoted to the movement against Midwest Generation said they received little response to their attempts to open communication with the company.

The Roll Beyond Coal protestors remained hopeful that their voices will spur action from Midwest Generation and its parent company, Edison International. In completion of the march, protestors held a moment of silence for lives lost to coal pollution. Then they came forward, one-by-one, and solemnly placed paper roses on a blanket across the street from Fisk; a memorial for the lives of Chicagoans believed to be taken by these plants.