

--&gt;

# Viewpoints: Germany shows we can transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy

By Richard Lipsitz and Rebecca Newberry

**SPECIAL TO THE NEWS**

Last year, the Huntley Power Plant in Tonawanda ceased operation. Since that time, the question of replacing both the jobs and the tax income from the plant has been the focus of intense discussion and planning. All segments of the population have participated in this movement, and the sentiment to find solutions to the loss of jobs and income is strong.

This situation is similar to the circumstances in the German Federal Republic, where a decision to shut down the country's coal production was made several years ago.

We recently visited Germany, and saw firsthand the efforts being made to address the shutdown of the coal industry.

We visited a newly formed lake community, a motor car speedway complex and a fabulous museum dedicated to the industrial heritage of the Ruhr valley. We saw a worker

retraining school and other workforce development sites. At every stop, the communities affected were involved in solving the question of jobs and income.

This experience gave us hope that a cleaner environment can be accomplished in Tonawanda and across the United States without leaving broken workers and communities behind.

It was for this reason that the Western New York Area Labor Federation and the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York were invited on a tour of the German coal industry this past November. We were part of a group organized by Heinrich Boll Stiftung of North America, the political arm of the German Green Party, and the Just Transition Fund, a philanthropic initiative housed at the Rockefeller Family Fund.

We were invited because of the work our organizations did around the closing of the Huntley Power Plant in the spring of 2016. The closing spurred a community-labor alliance which, with the support of the Western New York state delegation, resulted in historic legislation, the Fossil Fuel Closure Act of 2015, which guaranteed assistance to communities and municipalities hit by the closing of fossil fuel energy plants.

During our time in Germany, we met with officials from the Department of Energy and Economic Affairs of the German government, the Energy Division of the German Federation of Trade Unions, members of the German Parliament and officials of the Green Party. We also met with officials of the state government of Northrhine-Westphalia, the main coal mining region, with

representatives of various companies in the energy business, directors of local job training programs and friends from non-government organizations active in the transition movement.

In Germany, virtually no one denies the science of climate change, even those in right-center parties. The government leads in spearheading programs and policies that change energy production to cleaner, less polluting methods. Workers are retrained and jobs are found.

Communities are not left without money, and old production facilities are often reused. Stakeholders are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process.

It appears that the attitude is not hyperpartisan, and as a result, tangible progress is being made.

From this experience it is clear that a transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy can be achieved. New job opportunities and a new economic base in energy production can result.

In Germany, the government, businesses and working people, through their unions and nongovernment organizations, have coalesced around solving the difficult problems associated with transition.

There are real issues in continuing on such a path. The discussions we held did not sugarcoat the problems associated with such a huge economic reconstruction. Job loss, old physical plants being left to rot and tax erosion exist in Germany as well as our country. However, the lack of open rancor along with a united and scientific analysis

allows for the development of real programs to deal with the undeniable problems brought forward by a warming planet. Germany shows us that we can fight for a better economic future if we rely on science, use government money wisely and include all key stakeholders in an open process.

Unfortunately, the collaborative approach we observed in Germany does not exist in the United States.

There are many factors for the lack of progress. First and foremost is the role of big oil and gas in politics. Billions in subsidies are still being applied to these industries. Furthermore, the tax system is becoming more regressive. The money needed to make the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is simply not available in the same way we saw in Germany.

The idea that global warming is a hoax is simply a smokescreen put forward by the very industries that profit the most from a warming planet. For our society to become a leader on this issue, we must reject any approach that leaves out key stakeholders, particularly the workers and communities most affected.

Unfortunately, such an approach to this very difficult transition is further blunted by a two-party system that does not provide room for compromise at the national policy level. Germany is a multiparty democracy. No party has complete control of the government at the federal level. Instead, multiparty alliances are forged. These alliances, while not perfect, allow the type of discussion and participation that is essential in solving this problem.

The working people have a say in this process, and it is they who are the most affected by tumultuous changes in the economy. The United States is not in this position because of the very divisive role of the oil and gas industry, and its climate change-denier spokesmen.

The experience in Germany points to a path forward in solving many of the various and vexing questions facing our society. The most refreshing and hopeful aspect of the trip was how Germany is constructing a vision of what can be. Solutions are being developed by local leaders, leveraged by regional assets and using strategic alliances.

Many communities we visited understood that change of this magnitude will not happen overnight, or even in a couple of years. Structural change means first envisioning economic solutions, and then resourcing the strategies to make the vision real. We can do the same, and in doing so we can deal the forces of ignorance a setback, and maybe – just maybe – we can contribute to alleviating our society of the threat brought on by an ever-warming planet.

*Richard Lipsitz is president of the Western New York Area Labor Federation, AFL-CIO. Rebecca Newberry is executive director of the Clean Air Coalition of Western New York.*

---