



**Testimony of Elizabeth Yeampierre  
Executive Director of UPROSE & Co-Chair of the Climate Justice Alliance**

**Frontline Communities: Impacted by the Climate Crisis, Leading on Solutions**

My name is Elizabeth Yeampierre. I am Co-Chair of the Climate Justice Alliance, a national organization that links 68 organizations across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. I am also Executive Director of UPROSE, Brooklyn's oldest Latinx organization. Founded in 1966, UPROSE is dedicated to environmental and social justice and part of the national frontline climate justice movement representing those most impacted by climate change.

UPROSE is located in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. It is a diverse working-class community where over half of the residents are People of color/immigrants, mostly of Latinx descent. We have a poverty rate of nearly 26 percent, above the city average and far above the national average. Housing affordability is a major crisis, with nearly half of my neighbors being rent-burdened and the city undergoing extreme gentrification that will only worsen with the expansion of Opportunity Zones.

From a climate perspective, we are an industrial waterfront community exposed to flooding from hurricanes and storm surges, as was the case in 2012 when Superstorm Sandy hit. As a poor and working-class community, housing displacement and disruption of services due to storms and other severe weather affect our people much more acutely compared to residents of affluent communities with more resources. Further, on a day-to-day basis, disproportionate exposure to fossil fuel pollution and other climate change impacts, such as extreme heat, is built into New York City's policy fabric, transportation planning, and economic development, all arising from racism that compounds the pollution impacts with socioeconomic inequities. The oppression of low wages and underfunded schools in our community is exacerbated by high rates of asthma and other pulmonary diseases, heart disease, and lung cancer, which further restrict my neighbors' economic and educational potential.

**The Climate Justice Alliance**

The Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) is an alliance of more than 68 frontline community organizations, movement networks, and movement support groups rooted in Indigenous, African American, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander, and poor white communities living on the frontlines of climate change, as well as the "dig, burn, drive, dump" industries causing this crisis.

Like climate change, the conditions of our communities are the consequence of a long history of extraction. We share legacies of fighting colonialism, as well as race, class and gender oppression, while advocating for environmental justice. And we share vision, values and principles that guide our environmental, economic, and social justice organizing. Our communities are the first and most impacted by the storms, fires, floods and droughts, and are disproportionately burdened by the pollution, poverty and systemic violence associated with the multinational corporations driving these ecological crises.



Puerto Rico is the most recent and drastic example of a land ravaged by corporate extraction, with people left to fend for themselves after years of colonialism, austerity and neglect. The double disaster of Hurricanes Irma and María created an opportunity for “disaster capitalists” to profit from people’s suffering in a time of social and economic devastation. The same thing took place in the Gulf South for Black and Indigenous communities after Hurricane Katrina. Climate change solutions must honor human rights and respect frontline leadership through the solutions that are proposed.

Elsewhere, the extractive economy continues to harm entire communities, as is the case with uranium mining in New Mexico, which affects over 60 Indigenous nations. The Southwest U.S. was declared a “National Sacrifice Zone” in the Federal Energy Policy of the 1970s. This means that environmental safeguards were not enforced, thus endangering human life. Drinking water is tainted with uranium and arsenic and there is a high rate of cancer, heart disease, and lung disease. Uranium mining is a key element of nuclear energy which is considered renewable in most federal clean energy policy initiatives. You can understand why we do not support the use of large-scale biofuel, biomass, mega-hydro dams, nuclear energy, or energy derived from burning waste. They are usually developed in our backyards, where we live, work, play and pray and they do not reduce emissions at the source of extraction, only prolonging any real solutions to the climate crisis.

### **Toward a Just Transition**

To effectively tackle climate change, we must invest in a Just Transition toward specifically local, living economies of scale.

Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy - not just for workers but for whole communities. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste-free.

This transition away from fossil fuels itself must be just and equitable, redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations, living wage jobs and economic and social development that aims to address historical harm and discrimination. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be.

It is clear from the scientific data that we must move away from fossil fuels. It will not be smooth but the transition must be just, leaving no worker or community behind. Frontline communities and an economic framework that moves us away from extraction must be at the center of any effort to address climate change.

Climate change demands that we live with what we need instead of what we want. Everywhere people are learning to do this, and frontline communities are leading the way and reclaiming their traditions.

### **New York’s first solar cooperative is community owned**



All around the country there are examples of frontline communities developing projects that engage innovative infrastructure, further local control, and create jobs. Some of these projects are in the early stages. Others are ready to be scaled up and replicated in ways that will benefit more people and communities if there is public investment and incentives to do so. The fossil fuel industry receives millions in subsidies. Imagine what communities already forging comprehensive solutions to the climate crises could do with the reallocation of those subsidies.

My organization, UPROSE, partnered with the NYC Economic Development Corporation, Solar One and Co-op Power to create the first community-owned solar cooperative in New York State.

On a larger scale, we advocate for turning the area's industrial sector into an economic engine able to build for the region's climate-adaptable future. Offshore wind alone can deliver power directly to New York City, displacing the need for dirty power plants. But just as importantly, it would position the city at the center of this emerging industry, driving local economic development.

This industry will revitalize our working waterfront and create thousands of blue-collar industrial jobs. The Department of Energy expects 40,000 new jobs in the sector by 2030. Those jobs will be located wherever the ports and the workforce are. This could move our region away from the fossil fuels that threaten our climate while blunting the forces of real estate speculation that are disrupting our communities. An offshore wind hub in Sunset Park would serve as an innovative model of economic development that would transform our energy system and provide pathways to a middle class income for workers. It would act as a bulwark against extractive real estate interests and position the city as a leader on climate change solutions at the national level. From the very local to a much larger scale, frontline communities like ours are working to operationalize creative solutions that address local needs.

### **Educating for the future, solving problems now**

For years, in another part of the country, the residents of Highland Park, Michigan suffered high energy costs and energy blackouts along with massive flooding. When the municipality was in financial crisis, the local energy company repossessed 1,000 streetlights, leaving the residents in the dark. Soulardarity, a local environmental justice group and a CJA member, stepped in and designed a system for installing solar-powered street lights. They have installed 7 solar-powered streetlights and created a proposal for the City to finance and install a full 1000, re-lighting the streets and providing affordable internet and civic engagement tools. Building on its commitment to energy democracy and community empowerment, Soulardarity created a bulk purchasing program that is training residents in solar installation and weatherization, readying them to step into clean energy jobs as they become available, and has deployed \$30,000 of solar lighting and other products in Highland Park and neighboring communities. They are using education and organizing to literally make light of a dark situation. The group is shortly releasing a Blueprint for Energy Democracy, a plan to make Highland Park a global model of sustainability and democracy, and collaborating with a diverse array of stakeholders to advance the plan, and advocating for state and federal actors to provide financial resources and technical assistance to bolster community plans.



## **Expanding solar while growing community jobs**

In Chicago, CJA member Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), which is based in a low-income, mainly Latinx immigrant neighborhood, worked hard to directly represent environmental justice communities in the state of Illinois' Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) by insisting that it focus on health, environmental justice, and economic justice opportunities. With unprecedented funds directed to low-income environmental justice communities, LVEJO developed access to a solar panel training program delivered in communities across the state that prioritizes community members that were formerly incarcerated or had aged out of the foster care system. FEJA programs were designed to bring the benefits of solar energy to low-income communities, whether or not they are able to install the panels on their homes, including energy sovereignty opportunities for low-income communities to build ownership of solar systems. The group is also at the center of a plan to repurpose a closed down coal-fired power plant, with the goal of using it for community-run projects.

These are but a few examples of how our communities are developing concrete projects to address the climate crisis. There are many more that look at the different tipping points and sectors needed to halt the climate crisis and if we want to ensure a healthy future for future generations we must start prioritizing and scaling them now.

## **Following the lead of the frontlines and acting now**

Today, we are at the tipping point with little time to waste. We urgently need a Just Transition to be centered in community-driven Climate Action Bills, coupled with a commitment to Just Recovery and Rebuilding Infrastructure. Simply put, we must have legislation that clearly prioritizes investments in scalable projects like those mentioned today that reduce emissions at the source and address the historical harm and discrimination communities like mine have faced for centuries.

Investment in just development plans around the nation through block grants earmarked for community-based organizations and community development funds would go even further to repair historical harm and center community innovation for water, land, air, and energy resources, in both urban and rural areas, as well as Indian Country.

Frontline communities know what is at stake, the question is: will legislation aid our communities' future survival or hinder it. I hope for all our sakes it will be the former.

