Expectant Waiting--Expectant Doing

Shelley Tanenbaum, QEW General Secretary
It feels like the entire state of California is holding our collective breath as we wait for El Nino to water our thirsty crops, reservoirs, shrunken lakes, and trees. In the city, trees deprived of winter rains for the past four years are dropping leaves in August. Lawns have gone brown. We keep our
favorite plants alive with buckets of water from kitchen runoff and gray water from the bathtub. How bad is it? We are told that even the mighty redwoods, trees that have had 240 million years to adapt to life on the planet, might need a bit of water to make it through (at least those in our backyards, like this one).

In the great central valley farmlands, California’s bounty of fruits and vegetables grows this year by draining 20,000-year-old aquifers, while normal irrigation allocations have been severely limited or cut-off entirely. So, we hold our breath and pray, waiting for the rain and snow that meteorologists promised and didn’t deliver last year, hoping they will be right this year.

In much the same way, people all over the world are hoping and praying for an historic agreement at the climate conference in Paris—the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, November 30–December 11. But we aren’t just holding our breath: people everywhere are mobilizing to make this a turning point in our collective history. Actions to move from a fossil-fuel based economy to a carbon-neutral (or negative) economy are needed not just at the international level; it is exciting that local and statewide efforts are gaining in momentum.

Earlier this year, mayors from around the world committed their communities to climate action. Transition Town ideas are becoming a reality in several communities. States are taking up the climate change challenge—New York, Hawaii, and California have each enacted significant changes to move toward carbon neutrality, and Massachusetts is seriously considering a carbon tax.

In the lead-up to Paris, we in grassroots efforts also are not just holding our breath. We will be gathering to express our concerns and raise our voices throughout the fall. Events were planned around the Pope’s visit to Congress on September 24 and his visit to the United Nations in New York. Many localities supported companion gatherings along with the Washington, DC and NYC events.

October 14 is the People’ Climate Movement National Day of Climate Action and events are planned for several cities including New York, Washington, DC, Miami, Denver, and San Francisco (see www.peoplesclimate.org). Marches are planned in Paris on the day before the UN conference begins, November 29, and after the conference, on December 12. QEW has initiated a project to raise our Quaker voices on climate change—we are collecting 3-minute videos from Friends and distributing them widely, asking the questions: What is your biggest concern for our planet? What is your solution (or where should we begin)? See https://youtu.be/_zdUqubccKk to add your voice.

Californians are not just holding our breath about the weather. We recognize that major changes have to be made in how and which crops we grow, how we distribute water throughout the state, and what kind of "lawns" we plant. Our Governor told urban water users we had to reduce summertime water consumption by 25 percent and we responded by reducing our use by 30 percent. Agriculture (80 percent of water use in the state) is a much longer story, although it is interesting to remember that almonds got bad press a few months ago because they are such water hogs. Those almonds were planted during and after the last big drought in former cotton fields because they used less water than cotton. This time around, even less thirsty crops and more water conservation ideas need to be part of the future (for instance, California is one of the few states that still does not regulate ground water use).

Climate change tells us that drought is no longer a 15-, 50-, or 1,200-year event. All of the west needs to be prepared for hotter, drier, and longer summers.