

We Power DC: The campaign for energy justice and clean public power

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How it started

In Washington DC, all residents get their power bills from Pepco, an investor-owned monopoly utility that rakes in huge profits, while sourcing most of its power from fossil fuels. Like most utilities, Pepco doesn't actually generate electricity; Pepco owns all of the city's energy infrastructure (think gas and power lines), and buys electricity from a mix of energy producers (mostly coal and gas burning power plants, and some solar and wind farms). Pepco then distributes the electricity it buys through the power lines into residents' homes, sends them a bill, and nets millions of dollars for its shareholders. Pepco is a monopoly, because it is the only company that DC residents can pay for reliable electricity (unless they generate their own). This arrangement works out great for Pepco and its shareholders. But it doesn't work out well for DC residents, or the warming planet. Pepco has invested heavily in fossil fuel infrastructure, done only the politically required minimum to source power from renewables, and donates regularly to political candidates to cement its influence in the District.

In 2019, a group of DC residents decided to start pushing back. Seeing an opportunity in the upcoming DC Council race, they launched a "No Pepco Pledge," calling on candidates to reject Pepco's donations and support legislation to replace DC's investor-owned utility with a greener, cheaper, public utility. Seven candidates signed the pledge, and three of these signers -- Janeese Lewis-George, Brooke Pinto, and Christina Henderson -- went on to win their elections.

In 2020, the grassroots organizers behind the No Pepco Pledge formed We Power DC, and launched a full-on campaign for clean public power. When the pandemic hit DC hard in 2020, We Power DC shifted their focus to residents' more immediate needs and an urgent problem: energy justice. DC workers were laid off by the thousands, low-income residents struggled to pay their rent and surging electricity bills, and many families started racking up utility debt. Given the overwhelming issues of the current DC energy system, only exacerbated by the pandemic, We Power DC decided to tackle residents' mounting utility debt, the looming threat of shutoffs, and an imminent electricity rate hike to ensure their neighbors had their basic needs met first. The DC Council enacted a short-term moratorium on utility shut-offs during the pandemic, but We Power DC called on councilmembers to go further. No family should ever have to fear losing the power they need to heat their home or cook their meals -- regardless of whether a pandemic is ongoing. We Power DC also called for all pandemic-caused utility debt to be forgiven.



We Power DC demands:

- That the DC Council enact a *permanent* ban on utility shutoffs and unjust utility fees
- That Pepco forgive all existing utility debt *without* passing the costs onto ratepayers
- That Pepco pay *all* contractors union wages and provide them with health insurance
- That the DC government invest *significantly* more in household solar installations, community solar, and electrification for renters and low-income neighborhoods.

Just when We Power DC was launching these demands, Pepco announced its intention to raise utility rates by over \$100 per household, despite the unprecedented financial struggles of families across the district. This rate increase would do nothing to advance DC's clean energy goals. And Pepco was in no need of extra funds: Pepco reported \$220 million in profits in just a single quarter of 2020.

How it's going

In response to Pepco's attempt to raise utility rates, We Power DC has worked hard to mobilize community resistance. They targeted the Public Service Commission, a once little-known municipal body that governs investor-owned utilities and has the power to reject Pepco's rate hike. WPDC's organizers created a toolkit that made it easy for over 250 residents to submit form letters to the Commission, and turned out over 100 residents to testify at one of the PCS's hearings -- a city record. These efforts garnered the attention of local media, and won the support of many respected environmental partner organizations, including the Sierra Club, Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Jews United for Justice, Sunrise Movement, and several DC Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (or ANCs, a hyperlocal governing body that addresses issues in their neighborhoods). These efforts also sparked important conversations with national unions like the Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA) that represent utility workers and contractors, and have a shared interest in ensuring that workers in the energy sector make a living wage.

DC's Public Service Commission and the DC Council now know that DC residents are paying attention to where their power comes from and where their utility bills go. When DC Council Chairman Phil Mendelson attempted to lift the temporary ban on utility shutoffs, his proposal was defeated. We Power DC is now working on making the moratorium on shutoffs permanent and ensuring DC residents come out of the pandemic free of utility debt, with their basic electricity needs met.

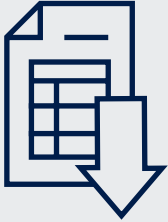
Pepco pushback

Pepco has demonstrated time and time again its commitment to shareholder profits over the wellbeing of DC families. In 2018, as DC was drafting one of the most ambitious clean energy and climate plans in the country, Pepco fought against key provisions in the bill that would force them to clean up the grid and invest in renewable energy. Then, in mid-2020, in the middle of a pandemic and a recession, Pepco filed a case with the Public Service Commission to raise their rates by over \$100 per year for the next three years -- all while making multimillion dollar profits that more than covered the \$30 million dollars of residential utility debt.

Utilities try to keep regulatory bodies focused on obscure technical issues to limit public opposition. But WPDC has shown that we can involve masses of people in regulatory processes if we speak to the fundamental issues of climate and economic justice underlying utility regulation.

WPDC's vision for a greener, more democratic future

We Power DC's long-term goal is to replace Pepco with a publicly owned utility. Why?



Lower bills

Customers of public-owned utilities tend to pay 11% less for power, saving the average household \$117 per year. And without shareholders to pressure them to pay multi-million dollar executive salaries, public utilities don't face the same pressure to raise rates.



Renewable energy and community control

All the utilities in the US that get 100% of their energy from renewables are publicly-owned. DC plans to source 100% of its energy from renewables by 2032, but Pepco is resisting this change. When the community owns our utility, we can guarantee a just transition, powered by clean energy, instead of protecting shareholder profits.



Community investment

Public utilities re-invest 33% more of their revenues into the communities they serve. That means instead of paying fines to avoid building solar infrastructure, like Pepco, a public utility will invest in good jobs and clean energy- and every megawatt of locally installed solar can add \$2.5 million and 20 construction jobs to the local economy.

Municipalization has worked before. 1 in 7 electricity consumers in the US are served by a public-owned utility. Some notable examples are Los Angeles, CA, Austin, TX, Chattanooga, TN, and Omaha, NE.

Campaign Takeaways

- **Utilities and power systems can be demystified.** Although power systems are extremely complicated, residents want to know where their power comes from and where their money goes.
- **Organizing around pocketbook issues is a good way to start broader conversations about the need for clean public power.** No one likes a monopoly. Investor-owned utilities like Pepco, that exercise undue power in many cities across the US, are already extremely unpopular with residents.
- **Resident mobilization works.** We Power DC's recruitment and easy-to-understand toolkit attracted over 100 residents to testify at Pepco's rate increase hearing at the Public Service Commission, which is usually a sleepy body that few pay attention to. Community testimony was so powerful that a Public Service Commissioner wrote a highly unusual letter citing the high turnout at the hearing and condemning Pepco's rate increase.



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