



CEJA and the Closing of the Prairie State Coal Plant

As a member of the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition, LWVIL actively educated and advocated for more than two years to pass the Clean Energy Jobs Act (CEJA). After protracted and difficult negotiations through the summer, the emergent bill, The Climate and Equity Jobs Act (also CEJA) bore a striking resemblance to the original bill.

Signed into law this fall, the bill's focus on environmental justice and equitable economic development is considered a model for the country.

Even though closing Prairie State posed a potentially serious obstacle for advancing CEJA, League members and other activists helped convince legislators and coalition leaders to support the effort. LWVIL issue specialist Bill Keogh offers an inside look at what took place.

As an Issues Specialist for LWVIL, I was privileged to observe working group meetings at the Climate Table. The Climate Table is the legislative working arm of the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition. This is where the legislation gets written. After all of the coalition partners have vetted the written language, it is published on the ICJC web site with logos, fact sheets, slide shows etc. There were about a dozen groups, each working on different parts of the legislation – such as clean energy, jobs and equity, etc. But there was only one group drafting legislation designed to end the use of fossil fuels, the Decarb/Just Transition group. Their focus was on emissions regulations (getting to zero emissions) and supporting communities when the fossil fuel power plants would be closed.

All of the initial discussion of the Decarb group was explicitly for, “Closing all fossil fuel power plants by 2030”. Presumably this included Prairie State Coal Plant, the largest and worst polluter, in the state. However, it was rarely mentioned by name, so one day I specifically asked whether Prairie State was included in their deliberations. In response, I was assured that it was, and the discussion moved on. Good, I thought.

However, I was reminded that the 2016 energy bill, FEJA, did not affect any of the Muni Co-ops, which own Prairie State. So I kept monitoring the discussion to make sure that would be included in CEJA. I even joined a Downstate Caucus, thinking that they would focus on Prairie State’s pollution of Southern Illinois. Still it was not being discussed.

That is when I discovered that these environmental activists all seemed to want to close Prairie State, but most found the project to be daunting. For instance, over 200 communities in eight states were committed to bonds and contracts with the company, and they did not see a way out of their contracts. And the entire project seemed politically toxic - pushing this point too hard might make the bill unpassable. This turned out to be true. At the end of the session and over the summer, the bill failed three times precisely on this point. Closing Prairie State had proved to be a very difficult ask.

Finally, in the Downstate Caucus, a lone activist made a last ditch plea to “move Prairie State up the agenda”, and a couple of us urged the group to listen to his argument. After a presentation on the problems and prospects of Prairie State, the Downstate Caucus pushed this back up to the Climate Table for a hearing. They concluded that it was essential to include a firm closing date for Prairie State in the legislation which was presented for community and legislative support.