



CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE GREAT INACTION

New Trade Union Perspectives



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Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) is a global, multi-sector initiative to advance democratic direction and control of energy in a way that promotes solutions to the climate crisis, energy poverty, the degradation of both land and people, and responds to the attacks on workers’ rights and protections.

Climate Change and the Great Inaction

New Trade Union Perspectives

This paper has been written for unions and unionists who are perhaps in the early stages of their engagement with climate change and who feel they might benefit from knowing “the story so far” in terms of trade union involvement. But it is also being written with an eye to the future, to generate discussion that may help unions develop the kind of compelling ideas and proposals that can lead to an increase in membership engagement and climate activism. A global movement demanding immediate and effective action on climate change is urgently needed, and unions can play an important and potentially decisive role. However, part of the process of building such a movement will require taking stock, in broad terms, of what has been learned with regard to past efforts both practically and at the level of ideas and core theoretical assumptions.

This paper focuses mainly on the UN level, where the level of union activity has been very significant and worthy of examination. It will be clear from what follows that the climate politics of the international trade union movement has reached an impasse—the same is also true of other movements who have fought for a global climate agreement and have seen their hopes shattered. But this is more than a problem of barking up the wrong tree, or of the wrong set of persons sitting in the seats of power at the wrong time. The “green economy” framework that has informed trade union policy on climate change and sustainability has also reached a political dead end. This is obvious at the UN level and increasingly obvious at the level of the nation state, one or two exceptions notwithstanding. Once regarded as inevitable, the green economic transition as imagined by the more far-sighted wing of the political and

corporate establishment now borders on the impossible.¹

In following how unions have engaged the UN’s climate process, it is also possible to observe and reflect on how the trade union discussion has shifted from the days of the “triumph of the market” neoliberal globalist moment in the early 1990s to the present time, when the impacts of the Great Recession (and the need for jobs) are still all too evident in many parts of the world. In the early 1990s neoliberal capitalism was wiping the floor with unions. Unions of course remain under attack and very much on the defensive. But, in common with other social movements, unions have in recent years begun to engage in a deeper questioning of the political economy of capitalism from both a climate and environmental standpoint and from a socioeconomic perspective. Can politics significantly alter the systemic and profoundly unsustainable features of capitalism, particularly unlimited growth, accumulation, and consumption? In the light of the world leaders’ “great inaction” on climate change, this has to be the key question that lies at the heart of the trade union debate in the period ahead.

Warsaw: The End of the Beginning

On November 21, 2013, the international trade union delegation to the UN’s climate talks in Warsaw joined with a number of major NGOs and walked out of the conference center. It was an act of protest—an expression of deep frustration at the lack of progress, lack of ambition, and lack of sincerity that had penetrated every aspect of negotiations since the disastrous UN meeting in Copenhagen in late 2009. After years

of seemingly endless talk, the UN's climate process has failed to produce a new climate agreement to succeed the now expired Kyoto Protocol. Reassurances that progress has been made towards a "Second Commitment Period" now routinely follow every major meeting, but nothing changes the fact that emissions continue to climb and CO₂ levels are presently 60% above where they were in 1990, a statistic that is truly staggering in terms of its planetary implications.² The emission reductions scenarios presented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)³—a needed 85% reduction by 2050 based on year 2000 levels to stay between 2 and 2.4 degrees Celsius of global warming—are today as far removed from political reality than at any point since the UN climate talks began over 20 years ago.

Unions today see the need for a new course, one that is anchored in both mobilizing their members and building alliances with social movements who share the basic values and broad objectives of the trade union movement. There are no plans to abandon the talks themselves, and unions intend to participate "on the inside" at COP 20 in Lima and COP 21 in Paris, albeit with low expectations. But the intent is to expose national governments to higher levels of popular anger and indignation so that they will be compelled to take serious action to address the climate crisis. Indeed, the world's primary global labor body, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), is urging its national affiliates to help build mass support for a binding and ambitious global climate agreement by the end of 2015 when government negotiators will meet in Paris. Following the walkout in Warsaw, the ITUC's general secretary Sharan Burrow said, "What happened here will galvanize global determination and thus serve as the foundation for a people-led climate movement."⁴

The shift towards a "pressure from below" strategy raises a number of obvious challeng-

es for unions. For more than a decade unions have been engaged in targeted lobbying effort that required the dedication and tenacity of a few dozen union representatives marshaled by the ITUC and its regional organizations, with involvement from bodies like the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the Global Union Federations (GUFs), national trade union centers, and individual unions. The focus of this effort was clear: to have basic worker interests and concerns reflected in the text of a new global climate agreement that would succeed the Kyoto Protocol. Had the effort succeeded this would have been no small achievement in the context of today's corporate-dominated global discourse and would have given legitimacy to unions struggling to have a voice in national climate policy decisions. But a "workers clause" in a new climate agreement is only of value if there is an actual agreement, and therein lies the problem. Either way, the new direction proposed by the ITUC will require a much broader and deeper level of engagement from national trade union centers and individual unions.

That the situation now demands a shift in methods and tactics is indisputable, but it also calls for a programmatic and strategic reorientation. For the ITUC and its core affiliates in the global North, social partnership and social dialogue are still regarded as the defining features of "modern" trade unionism. This orientation is to some extent grounded in the evolution of the European Union, which institutionalized dialogue and partnership as core principles of the Treaty of Rome (Article 118B) that founded the European Union in 1957. Social dialogue is in one sense consistent with the core social democratic belief in the primacy of politics over markets, that social actors can "work things out" and that trade union priorities—such as collective bargaining and social solidarity—are in some respects the hallmarks of a modern, efficient, and dynamic economy and not relics from a bygone era.

The “great inaction” on climate change is yet another indication that social dialogue and social partnership need to be replaced by a new trade union narrative around movement building and alliances, coupled with a new agenda or program grounded in economic democracy and popular power.

The UNFCCC and the Kyoto Process

Global attention to climate change and sustainable development increased in the early 1990s. The UN Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992—known as the first “Earth Summit”—marks an important and well-known milestone. The adoption of the UNFCCC in 1992 led to steps to establish the political architecture at the global level to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (the main one being CO₂) at a level that would prevent “dangerous interference” with the climate system.

In 1995, the first Conference of the Parties (or COP 1) met in Berlin—the “parties” being signatory governments to the UNFCCC. After intense negotiations at COP 3, held in Kyoto in 1997, delegates agreed to a Protocol that committed developed countries to achieve quantified targets for decreasing their emissions of greenhouse gases. These richer countries, known under the UNFCCC as Annex 1 Parties, committed themselves to reducing their collective emissions by at least 5.2% below 1990 levels by 2012.

One of the progressive features of the UNFCCC Kyoto process was the “equity principle” that placed a heavier burden on developed nations by way of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” which acknowledged that all countries had a common responsibility to address climate change and emissions levels but that some had more responsibility than others—as well as different capacities to address the

problem. Rich countries are presently responsible for more than 60 percent of annual emissions even though only 20 percent of the global population lives in those countries. Rich countries are also responsible for 80 percent of the cumulative emissions that are causing climate change today and will do so for the next 100 years or more. Since 1950, the U.S. has emitted a cumulative total of roughly 50.7 billion tons of carbon, while China (4.6 times more populous) and India (3.5 times more populous) have emitted only 15.7 and 4.2 billion tons respectively.⁵

The UNFCCC and Kyoto process was built on the assumption that responding to climate change would require emissions reductions from the developed countries while developing countries would take steps to control their emissions trajectories and then reduce emissions over the longer term. It also acknowledged that developed countries have a responsibility to support developing countries to meet this challenge through the transfer of low-emission technologies and financial assistance. On this reasoning, the rich nations owe an “ecological debt” to the poor ones, of whom many are already suffering the consequences of global warming in the form of droughts, monsoons, and disease.

Faith in the Market

As noted above, the UN climate process emerged during a period of the “triumph of the market” just following the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, a development that turbo-charged neoliberal reforms such as financial deregulation, privatization, and removal of labor market protections. Thus the climate protection debate at the global level was awash with neoliberal ideas and market-based proposals. The three “Kyoto mechanisms” proposed to facilitate emissions reductions bear the

clear mark of neoliberal thinking. With rich governments routinely failing to meet their foreign aid commitments, these mechanisms were also presented as a means of raising large amounts of capital in ways that could also generate private profit and allow the market to work its magic. The first and most important mechanism is international emissions trading (IET, often called carbon trading), and the other two mechanisms are the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and Joint Implementation (JI). A full explanation of these mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to stress that unions were in no real position to challenge either the mechanisms themselves or the deeper ideological assumptions behind them.

nificantly, of the few unions attending the UN meetings, most were from Europe where the principles of social dialogue and social partnership lay at the heart of the trade union approach at the level of the EU and global multi-lateral processes.

In the early COPs the capacity for unions to project a distinct voice in a room filled with other players—corporations, NGOs, as well as governments—was a major challenge and remains a challenge to this day even though union participation has grown exponentially. Until 2003, the number of trade unionists attending the COP meetings stood in single digits and the effort was largely one of information gathering and observing. However, at COP 4

What Now? If governments are unwilling to lead when leadership is required, people must. We need a global grass roots movement that tackles climate change and its fallout.

Kofi Annan, former Secretary General to the United Nations

Jobs, Just Transition, Social Dialogue

Unions joined the process after the UNFCCC was already in place and the negotiations around the Kyoto Protocols were already well underway. Rather than expend energy on highlighting problems with the market-based approach to emissions mitigation and climate protection in general, unions instead preferred to focus on delivering a clear and positive trade union message at the talks. Consistent with the broad union message on sustainability, unions called for the “social dimension” to be considered in the approval of, for example, CDM and JI projects, pointing, for example, to the Belgian government’s social criteria that it developed with input from the Belgian trade unions.⁶ Moreover, unions urged that revenues from carbon trading and other financial mechanisms be properly directed to promote sustainable development. Unions called for a social consensus on climate protection uniting companies, governments, and unions. Sig-

in Buenos Aires in 1998, the ITUC predecessor organization, the ICFTU, along with the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD, issued a statement that called for more attention to be paid to both the positive and the negative effects on employment of different emission reduction scenarios, noting that the success of emissions reduction strategies would depend on the engagement of workers, unions, and employers to achieve agreed targets at workplaces and in promoting political support for other measures within their communities around the world. For this partnership to materialize, they argued, workers must feel confident that their livelihoods are not jeopardized. Unions therefore began to articulate the need for “just transition” policies to deal with the negative impacts on employment brought about by climate policies and to highlight the need for income protection, re-employment opportunities, education, and re-training—all within a framework of social dialogue at all levels. It was argued that such policies would

reduce worker resistance to climate protection policies and also help ensure worker and union engagement and cooperation.⁷

At the 2006 COP 12 in Nairobi, unions put emphasis on the role of workplace-level emissions reduction initiatives, including union-management “target-setting, monitoring, record-keeping, and implementation” in conjunction with collective agreements and other special partnership arrangements. Unions called for increased action on energy conservation, fuel efficiency standards in vehicles, green construction methods and regulations, and more efficient coal-fired power plants. Unions also called for “investments in a mix of clean, green and sustainable energy sources” with sustainable electricity and fuels, including wind power, solar power, some forms of biomass, micro hydro energy, and—especially for transitional purposes—“clean coal,” advanced technology vehicles (including public transport), and natural gas. Unions called for new technologies to be developed, such as combined heat and power (CHP) and carbon capture and storage (CCS) in power plants and carbon-intensive industries.⁸

In 2007 the European Trade Union confederation (ETUC) commissioned its own study exploring how jobs could be created by climate protection policies, and how vocational training and skills building were important dimensions of a transition towards a low-carbon EU economy. It concluded that, overall, employment benefits would accrue as a result of climate protection policies.⁹ Jobs and “just transition” were therefore at the heart of the trade union message on climate change during this first phase of activity on the global scene. In keeping with the policy discourse of the time, unions talked and acted as if the transition to a low carbon economy was inevitable—the science was, after all, definitive and a broad consensus was emerging among business, governments, and civil society that emissions re-

ductions were both urgently needed and made good economic sense.

At COP 13 in Bali (2007), the number of union delegates had grown to 91 (from 22 countries)¹⁰ and, due to their growing presence, unions were given formal observer status at the negotiations. Jobs remained central to the trade union message. At the 2008 meeting in Poznan (COP 14)¹¹ unions promoted a “green jobs strategy” thus underscoring the belief that emissions mitigation challenges could be transformed into employment opportunities within renewable energy sectors (wind, wave, tidal power, CHP, concentrated solar) as well as low carbon vehicles and carbon capture and storage.¹² Unions also continued to call for policies that lead to “greening the workplace” and to the cultivation of a new workplace culture to promote energy and resource efficiency. The ITUC also emphasized the need for trade unions and civil society to be involved at all levels of decision-making.

The Green Economy and the UNEP

As unions began to engage with the UNFCCC and the Kyoto process, the relationship between unions and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) grew closer. Led by Sustainlabour, 2006 UNEP partnered with the ITUC (then ICFTU) to organize the First Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment in Nairobi.¹³ In 2007 UNEP launched its Green Economy Initiative in partnership with the ITUC, the ILO, and the International Organization of Employers (IOE).

The partnership was consistent with the main climate and sustainability message of both the ITUC and the ILO, but UNEP’s status and reach—as well as its capacity to frame and promote policy—would amplify this message considerably. The presence of the employer’s organization, the IOE, was politically decora-

tive but largely superfluous. UNEP also committed considerable resources for training trade unionists on core themes like green jobs and just transition, trainings that were conducted by the Sustainlabour Foundation based in Madrid, an entity with historical ties to the left trade union federation, Comisiones Obreras.

In 2008 the partnership resulted in a major global green jobs study titled *Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable and Low Carbon World*, a 400-page document authored by the Worldwatch Institute and the Cornell Global Labor Institute but released by UNEP.¹⁴ The study showed how an aggressive science-based approach to emissions reductions and other green initiatives could generate millions of jobs across key economic sectors in both the global North and South.¹⁵ The report essentially appealed to governments to fully embrace the green economy and operated on the now questionable assumption that governments took full employment and job creation seriously.

The Great Recession and the Green Alternative

With the onset of the financial crisis and the “great recession” of 2008-2009, there was a sense that the historical moment had arrived where unions and their allies could be even more assertive about the need for green investments and a green transition as a means of responding to rising unemployment and falling living standards.¹⁶ In early 2009 then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd talked of “regime change” announcing, Fukiyama style, that the end of the neoliberal era had arrived and a new period of social democratic political economy was about to commence.¹⁷ UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, President Obama, and other world leaders talked openly of the need for a “Green New Deal.”¹⁸

The union approach to the green economy during this time was to emphasize the reflationary value of green investments, turning it into demand-side and more explicitly Keynesian project—in other words, one entirely consistent with “social contract” unionism of post-war Europe and North America. For the ILO, the green economy framework provided what seemed to be the perfect opportunity to reinvigorate its otherwise fading mission—one built on tripartism, social dialogue, and social partnership. Measures like the carbon tax in Australia, the green growth pact in South Africa, and the green measures in the 2009 Obama stimulus package were applauded and interpreted as signs that a period of Green Keynesianism was about to commence. The development of renewable energy in Germany demonstrated how “policies, regulation and investment can drive investment into the green economy and create jobs.”¹⁹

In trade union circles, most references to the green economy were for the most part couched in the language of restoring demand, generating “inclusive” growth and promoting social dialogue.²⁰ At the Rio+20 summit in June 2012, a number of unions emphasized the need for strong financial regulation, constraints on speculation, and support for the “real economy.”²¹ This essentially social democratic version of the green economy provided a framework for workers’ rights, decent work, “just transition,” job-centered growth, a strong role for the government and the public sector, and the need for social dialogue in order to facilitate the green transition and make it more equitable and socially acceptable.²²

But UNEP’s vision of the green economy was always more inclined towards engaging private sector players. To UNEP, the trade unions were situated on a long list of “civil society partners,” and while UNEP was prepared to sink resources into trade union education on climate change, the environment, and sustain-

ability, the union message was often lost in the more generic message of green growth. When the political winds eventually turned to the right in 2010-11, blowing strongly against the green neo-Keynesian narrative, UNEP had little problem shifting its focus back toward private investors and the market. UNEP's views were and remain more consistent with those of one of the main champions of green capitalism, Lord Stern, author of the landmark 2006 study, *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*. Stern concluded that the development of a climate friendly green capitalism largely depends on politically imposing a price on carbon and activating this through emissions trading schemes (or "cap and trade") that would, over time, cohere into a global carbon market.²³ Stern was concerned to see "a strong technology policy framework that drives action by the private sector."²⁴ Today UNEP bangs the same drum, only louder than before, reminding those who are still listening that "The window for addressing climate change is rapidly narrowing but equally the options for cost effective action have never been more abundant."²⁵

Science and Solidarity

While the job-related benefits of the green economy were the main emphasis of the trade unions during this period, by COP 13 in Bali in late 2007 unions had already showed that they were prepared weigh in more noticeably on some of the other main issues at the heart of the UN negotiations—most importantly, the science-based emissions reductions targets proposed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).²⁶ The IPCC has been the most important source for the UNFCCC's scientific and technical information. Drawing on the data generated by more than 2,000 peer-reviewed scientific reports, in 2007 the IPCC issued its Fourth Assessment Report and presented its main findings in Bali. With sev-

eral thousand delegates present, Dr. Rajendra Kumar Pachauri, then chair of the IPCC, led a series of presentations on the changes taking place in the earth's climate and life-sustaining ecosystems as a result of climate change. The report was sobering and led to a constant stream of bold speeches and calls to action, as well as references to dangerous tipping points, climate turbulence, and the need for "political will." Unions supported the official "Bali Action Plan" adopted at COP 13, which called for deep cuts in emissions consistent with the IPCC's proposals. According to the IPCC, developed countries needed to reduce their emissions by 25-40% from 1990 levels by 2020—a massive undertaking. The deadline for a new global agreement being forged was set for COP 15 in Copenhagen, exactly two years after Bali. The ITUC saw Bali and the IPCC's targets as a rallying cry for "a new trade union internationalism."²⁷ The European Trade Union Confederation captured the sense of urgency among the trade unions during COP 13

*We don't have time for the luxury of talking for two years before taking action. We hope that the consensus reached in Bali marks the start of a serious worldwide commitment. The hard work starts now.*²⁸

Target Practice: the AFL-CIO

Unions who are today looking to become more engaged on climate change need to be aware that the IPCC's targets have sparked some controversy within the trade union movement. The ITUC has consistently fought for science-based targets and for climate policy to reflect the IPCC's targets for both 2020 and 2050. However, not all unions have been on the same page. During this period, the ITUC successfully repelled pressure (mostly from affiliates of the AFL-CIO) to discard the 2020 target (see below) on grounds that ambitious targets would provide the anchor for green investments and green jobs. A pro-science posi-

tion also allowed the ITUC to stand in solidarity with unions in the global South, and with people who are already feeling the impact of global warming.

Why did some unions oppose the targets? For the AFL-CIO, perhaps the leading trade union opponent, two issues stand out: U.S. competitiveness and coal. The AFL-CIO was very vocal in its opposition to the Kyoto treaty in 1997 because it believed that a treaty that required the U.S. to make emissions reductions that at the same time exempted industrial competitors like China (huge per capita emissions disparities notwithstanding) was a non-starter.²⁹ At the 2008 COP 14 meeting in Poznan, the AFL-CIO again differed with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) on targets and timetables. The ITUC again called on developed country governments to pursue the IPCC targets of 25-40% reductions by 2020 based on 1990 levels. Unable to agree with this position, the AFL-CIO produced its own statement that made no reference to specific targets. In a memo to the ITUC it was noted that

*The AFL-CIO remains concerned that there is a mismatch between proposed (IPCC) targets and the availability of critical technologies, i.e. carbon capture and sequestration.*³⁰

This reasoning reveals the AFL-CIO's commitment to the idea of "clean coal," irrespective of the fact that carbon capture and seques-

4% reduction from 1990 levels—a far cry from the IPCC's 25-40% reduction from 1990 levels. By moving the benchmark year from 1990 to 2005, the Obama Administration could, in a stroke of a State Department pen, make invisible the 16% rise in U.S. emissions since 1990. The AFL-CIO could not support Obama's 17% target either, a fact that drew attention to the prevailing influence of unions in carbon intensive sectors like power generation and manufacturing over U.S. trade union climate policy.

The Copenhagen Fiasco—and After

The Bali Action Plan had identified COP 15 at the end of 2009 as the target date for a new global climate agreement to be negotiated and ready to take effect after the expiration of the Kyoto agreement in 2012. At COP 15 the climate movement made what was perhaps its first significant appearance. An estimated 80,000 people took to the streets chanting "system change, not climate change"—but the union voices among them could be measured in hundreds rather than thousands. Confident that the UN process could deliver a binding agreement and eager to work constructively with the Danish government around the talks, the Danish unions chose not to participate either in the demonstrations or in the People's Climate Forum discussions outside of the official UN-

This is a class war. While billionaires prepare safe havens for themselves and their money, workers will pay the price of climate change; as will, disproportionately, the world's poorest populations.

Jyrki Raina, General Secretary of IndustriALL Global Union

tration had made no noticeable progress up to that point and practically none since.³¹ In the months before COP 15 in Copenhagen, the Obama administration announced its own emissions reduction target: a 17% reduction of emissions based on 2005 levels, or roughly a

FCCC proceedings. This dampened any interest unions in other parts of Europe may have had in participating in the demonstration—although unions from France and Belgium were visible, as was the ITUC's 400-person global delegation.

But COP 15 ended in a fiasco when the U.S. and other key governments presented a 6-page memo called the “Copenhagen Accord,” the main premises of which were, firstly, a mandatory set of emissions reductions targets could not provide the basis for an agreement and, secondly, voluntary commitments were both possible and potentially just as effective. The Accord threw the UNFCCC into a crisis from which it shows no real signs of recovering. In the months following COP 15, countries came forward with their voluntary targets, which (not surprisingly) fell far short of the IPCC’s emissions reduction proposals—targets that have become still weaker since.

The Copenhagen Accord amounted to a double blow for the 400-person international union delegation participating in the talks. Firstly, the IPCC’s science-based targets and the equity principle reflected in “common but differentiated responsibilities” were both abandoned along with mandatory targets. The prospects for the green economy, whether it is UNEP’s more market-based version or the trade unions’ more neo-Keynesian model, both depended on an ambitious and binding global treaty. COP 15 was therefore a disaster, for without mandatory targets the green economy would remain marginal. Secondly, prior to COP 15 the UNFCCC had accepted trade union language on “just transition” in the “shared vision for long term cooperative action” segment of the “Negotiating Text” released in June 2009 in preparation for COP 15.³² Union delegates were optimistic that the language would be retained and thus included in a new global agreement, but the Copenhagen Accord contained no such language.

In contrast to the ITUC’s assessment, the AFL-CIO’s report from Copenhagen was unreservedly positive. The report emphasized the AFL-CIO’s constructive partnership with the U.S. Department of State and its negotiating team. The AFL-CIO’s delegation leader wrote,

*We found ourselves closely aligned with the State Department negotiators on issues critical to U.S. unions such as border adjustments, the participation of advanced developing nations such as China and India in setting emission targets, and transparency in verification of emission reductions. The AFL-CIO, environmental and business organizations were all prepared to hold joint press events in support of the U.S. government negotiating position but it never came to that.*³³

The Blue Green Alliance, a coalition of US unions and environmental groups, also applauded the Copenhagen Accord, noting the fact that all of the major economies had agreed to participate.³⁴ But for the ITUC there was no hiding from the disappointment:

*The lack of ambition in the emission reduction targets pledged by the United States, coupled with a minimalist pledge subject to stringent conditionality for financing adaptation in developing countries, the incapacity of the European Union to move to a target of a 30% reduction in GHG emissions from 1990 levels, and in general the negative position of all developed countries to agreeing on a second commitment period to the Kyoto Protocol all reinforced an environment of mistrust and conservatism on the part of the emerging economies.*³⁵

Developing Country Emissions

Unions looking to be involved in the climate movement need to be fully aware that one of the main questions that preoccupied the Copenhagen talks concerned the emissions trajectories of developing countries and what, if any, commitments developing countries make under a new agreement. Since the early 1990s there has been a sharp upward trend in the emissions trajectories of developing countries—which are also major industrial rivals of the rich countries. This has altered climate politics considerably in recent years. China is now the largest emitter—29% of the world’s annual greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions came from China in 2011 and most of the future growth in emissions will come from the developing

world, particularly the BRIC countries or Big Emerging Economies (BEES).³⁶

China's position in the negotiations—that it should not be bound by mandatory emissions reduction requirements—rests on the following arguments: it is still a country whose per capita emissions are lower than the rich countries; it needs to bring “development” to the people; and it is doing more to control its emissions trajectories than many developed nations.³⁷ But this overlooks the fact that 40% of China's emissions are generated by just 35 cities. The GHG footprint of a person in Shanghai is now 17 tons per year and in Beijing 12 tons per year (2008 figures). This can be compared to 6 tons per capita in Tokyo, and 7 tons in London and New York.³⁸ In 2009, China's inequality levels surpassed even those of the United States.³⁹ As Walden Bello has remarked,

*Paradoxically, the interests of China have become aligned with those of the United States. These two carbon criminals posture as being opponents in the negotiations, yet they have a common interest in prolonging as long as possible the achievement of a climate agreement and in making such an agreement as weak as possible.*⁴⁰

The Emissions Deficit

The period from 2010 until the present (January 2014) further exposed major governments' lack of ambition to deal with climate change. The U.S. Congress's failure to pass a climate bill in 2010 meant that the Obama administration now had no obvious framework for meeting its own weak emissions reduction commitment under the Copenhagen Accord (a 17% reduction on 2005 levels by 2020). This reality led other major governments to eventually retreat from their own commitments made under the Accord. Some had welcomed the Accord as a needed shift in the dynamics of the negotiations, even though the Accord's developed country pledges amount to (at best)

a 16% reduction on 1990 emissions levels by 2020, putting the world on course to achieve three to five degrees Celsius or 5.4 to nine degrees Fahrenheit of global warming by year 2100.⁴¹

COPs 16 and 17 in Cancun and Durban each attracted around 200 union delegates, although the numbers fell sharply for COP 18 in Doha and the most recent COP 19 in Warsaw in late 2013, where roughly 50 delegates participated. In Cancun, the negotiations managed to show some signs of revival. The ITUC's actions led to governments formally recognizing, in the draft Negotiating Text of what is hoped might frame a future agreement, the importance of “promoting a just transition of the workforce, the creation of decent work and quality jobs in... promoting economic growth and sustainable development.” The launch of a Climate Fund to help poor countries adapt to climate change and lower their own emissions trajectories was one of the more discussed issues, but subsequent COPs were to see little progress in this area.

By the time of the Warsaw talks in November 2013, a global climate agreement to succeed the Kyoto Protocol seemed further away than ever. On November 21, 2013, the ITUC delegation to COP 19 joined 800 environmental, youth, indigenous, and other civil society groups in a walk out of the talks, following statements by Canada and Japan that they did not expect to meet their Copenhagen Accord targets. The rich countries also backtracked on climate finance to assist developing countries to mitigate their emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

COP 19 in Warsaw was dubbed the “Corporate COP” because it was the first UN climate meeting to have corporate sponsorship. Eleven companies sponsored the COP and corporations' access to the process was unprecedented. Many of the social movement organi-

zations that walked out of the COP concluded that corporations' involvement in the process had rendered the talks useless. The Polish government also held a summit of coal companies during the negotiations. A spokesperson for the British TUC stated

Unions don't walk out on talks until the job is done. It's not our way. But here at the United Nations talks in Warsaw the government-to-government negotiations are getting nowhere. Pledges to cut carbon emissions, finance a just transition, support investment in decent work are all slipping away. We don't have a place at the table in this process—we can lobby and campaign, build alliances and hold good positive talks with progressive governments who listen. But the fact is, we are witnessing deeply disunited nations at work. We have to go back to our membership and communities to campaign some more, urgently build and strengthen public support and commitment so that when governments meet again next year they can be in no doubt where their obligations and responsibilities lie.⁴²

The Need for a Programmatic Shift

The international trade union movement can take considerable credit for what it has managed to achieve on climate change. Many of the trade unionists that fought to raise the voice of workers at the UN meetings had to first convince their own organizations that climate change was a union issue—which was often far from straightforward. In an era of right wing attacks and many demands on the resources of unions, the impact registered by the “climate cadre” attending the COPs and trying to move national governments was considerable. Their knowledge, experience, and commitment are a valuable resource for unions in the period ahead.

The present juncture provides a good opportunity for unions to take stock of the state of climate politics and what the 20 years since the 1992 Earth Summit has revealed about capitalist political economy. This assessment

points to the need for a new approach and a programmatic shift, one that can offer real solutions and help move members into action, something the “green economy” framework has plainly failed to do.

Science is telling us all to revolt.

Naomi Klein

The majority of unions that have tried to shape climate policy have operated on the premise that the real-world historical options are essentially twofold. Either humanity will transition to some form of “inclusive” green capitalism, or we will face a “suicide capitalism” scenario where fossil-fuel corporations and major industrial, agricultural, transportation, and retail interests are successful in extending “business as usual” past the point of an ecological no return. As noted above, unions question the extent to which private markets can drive green growth, and they have sought to move the debate toward a global Green New Deal (GND) through which governments, with union support, play a leading role in the transition. Positioning the trade unions in this way was a pragmatic accommodation to the political realities of the period. But now unions are beginning to question the capacity of the political economy of capitalism to reorganize itself in a way that can effectively address the climate crisis and still be able to continue to grow more or less indefinitely. And in a time of growing inequality, precarious work, and record levels of unemployment in some countries, the value of economic growth as a means of addressing these problems has been subjected to an increased level of scrutiny and skepticism.

Looking to the future, the main programmatic feature that needs to remain intact is the commitment to the IPCC's emissions reductions scenario. As noted above, not all unions recognize the need for science to guide climate policy, but the global trade union movement has

been nevertheless largely united in its commitment to a science-based approach. This is an indispensable component of a progressive trade union climate agenda, and it was a position reaffirmed at the ITUC's World Congress in Vancouver during 2010.⁴³

But the full implications of a science-based agenda calls for a *different set of solutions* that go beyond the green economy framework as understood by UNEP and the ILO. The UNEP/ILO approach has accommodated itself to the neoliberal idea that the role of government is to, according to the ILO itself,

*influence the market and encourage the private sector towards a green transition and overcome the problems of missing private price signals. In this sense, public investment plays a complementary role to larger market-based mechanisms.*⁴⁴

This understanding of the relationship between the public and private sectors is deeply flawed and is also clearly inadequate from a policy perspective. The IPCC's emissions reduction scenario calls for nothing less than complete transformation in production and consumption patterns. Taking the science seriously also requires taking the solutions seriously, and the green economy framework can do neither. It is time to reject the illusory idea that a new phase of green capitalist accumulation is what is either likely or required, social dialogue or no social dialogue.

The Crisis of "Ecological Modernization"

It is clear that the failure of the UN process to produce a global climate agreement to succeed the Kyoto Protocol cannot be explained as if it were simply a problem of "political will." Instead it is symptomatic of a much deeper incapacity of the "green" wing of capitalism to put itself in the driving seat. The idea of green capitalism is grounded in a set of assumptions

known as "ecological modernization" that is itself tied to the idea that technological and other efficiencies can "dematerialize" economic activity. If more output can be generated from fewer material inputs, thus decoupling economic growth from environmental damage—including GHG emissions—then economic growth can continue in an uninterrupted fashion. The evidence to support this perspective today rests, perhaps appropriately, on very thin ice.

Furthermore, the entire theoretical framework of ecological modernization and green capitalism was developed around a presumed certainty—that natural resource scarcity would make more efficient use of those resources the key to competitiveness and, therefore, success. This positive assessment of the prospects for a "green transition" was captured by UNEP Executive Director's "The green economy is, in the end, inevitable" statement in 2010.⁴⁵ The UNEP-generated discourse is replete with such optimism, much of which is groundless.

Indeed, today what was once considered to be inevitable has been downgraded to a remote possibility as new sources of fossil-based power emerge. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), more than 50% of new global energy demand is being met by coal, and fossil fuels are expected to meet more than three-fourths of total energy needs in 2035 on the basis of today's policies. Exploitable coal reserves amount to one trillion tons globally.⁴⁶ There are approximately 280 GW of new coal-fired power generation under construction at the present time.⁴⁷ Energy companies are today euphoric about the prospects of a new "golden age" for fossil fuels.⁴⁸

Trade unionists are of course fully aware of the economic and political power of the fossil fuel companies. As of 2012, fossil fuel-producing companies and utilities represented 19 of the world's 50 leading corporations, account-

ing for 48 percent of the revenues and nearly 46 percent of the profits of this top-50 group.⁴⁹ Fossil fuel corporations' CEOs are among the richest people on the planet.⁵⁰ A recent analysis by The Carbon Tracker Initiative found that the current reserves of oil and gas companies (claims of oil and gas reserves that have not yet been extracted) are worth \$20 trillion. The top 100 coal and top 100 oil and gas companies had a combined value of \$7.42 trillion as of February 2011. The stock exchanges of London, Sao Paulo, Moscow, Australia, and Toronto all have an estimated 20-30 percent of their market capitalization connected to fossil fuels.⁵¹

Given this reality, the fate of ecological modernization and the "green growth" agenda is not determined by the logic of capital accumulation shaped by growing resource scarcity, but rests instead on political interventions at a time when fossil fuels are both lucrative and abundant—interventions such as carbon pricing, pollution control regulations, subsidies for renewable energy, and—perhaps most important of all—a global agreement with mandatory emissions reduction targets and timetables. But this agenda is not the agenda of the fossil fuel companies, who have responded to the green "challenge" aggressively at the global level and at the national level. These corporations use their tremendous concentration of wealth and power to control politics, including at the UN processes themselves. Proposed climate protection policies have been defeated in key countries by fossil fuel companies' direct political interventions. In the US alone, approximately \$3.5 billion is invested annually in lobbying activities at the federal level.⁵² In recent years, Royal Dutch Shell, the US Chamber of Commerce, Edison Electric Institute, PG&E, Southern Company, ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, and ConocoPhillips all made the top 20 list of lobbyists.⁵³ Globally these corporations are organized in interlinked trade associations such as the American Petroleum Institute, the Cana-

dian Association of Petroleum Producers, the Australian Coal Association, the Energy Intensive Users Group in South Africa, BusinessEurope, and the European steel and chemicals associations Cefic and Eurofer.⁵⁴

When it comes to proposing a political strategy to deal with the economic and political power of the fossil fuel companies and their "business as usual" agenda, UNEP and the ILO have almost nothing to say. The boldest policy proposal by far pertains to the removal of government subsidies for fossil fuel companies that are calculated to be in the realm of \$400-\$650 billion per year globally.⁵⁵ This would be a positive step, but it would not address the fundamental question of who owns and controls energy resources and for what reason is energy generated and used. As long as trade union climate policy operates in the shadows of the ILO and UNEP's green economy framework, the struggle against the fossil fuel companies' economic and political power and their "business as usual" agenda will be impeded.

Unions and the New Discourse

A growing number of unions and their social movements, in their critique of the "green economy" framework, have begun to generate a new discourse on sustainability and climate protection. This discourse draws attention to the fact that the green transition imagined by some world leaders and large "greener" corporations is incapable of getting to the root of the problems we face as a society, problems that are systemic in nature. It opposes the idea that "ecological modernization" and the attendant commodification of nature is key to solving the profound ecological crisis we face as a species. It regards the idea of putting a price on "natural resources" in order to make capitalism green and sustainable as plainly false and deeply perverse. The commodification of nature merely opens up new areas for economic

(and therefore social) exploitation, marketization, and privatization. The experience of the existing green economy is enough to show that this is not a green transition but an extension of the existing unsustainable economy into new areas, a new phase of “enclosure.” This will not solve the world’s environmental problems and will in many respects make them worse.

Green Economy concept... over-emphasizes market-based mechanisms” that could lead to “a green-washing of existing capitalist structures rather than addressing the real causes of the multiple crises.”⁵⁸ The Alliance of Progressive Labor in the Philippines has united with other organizations across Asia calling for “an immediate stop to the commodification, pri-

A growing number of unions and social movements who understand that global warming emissions are a symptom of a systemic problem. The political and social solutions that need to be applied to address both the causes and effects of climate change can also be used to redistribute wealth more fairly and thus allow us to tackle mass poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, insecurity, poor health and other social inequalities suffered by a large portion of humanity [...]. This is a world worth fighting for, for this generation and for future generations.

International Transport Workers Federation

This new discourse takes the view that the economic and environmental crises are two sides of the same coin. They must be addressed simultaneously and in ways that can promote real solutions, not false ones. Regulatory and market-based approaches—including carbon markets and taxes—have failed because they do not confront the power of the corporations and their control over energy resources, infrastructure, and markets. These approaches have not been able to impede the rush towards rising energy demand, rising fossil fuel use, and rising emissions.

This approach has been developed by the International Transport Workers’ Federation in its effort to address emissions from transport.⁵⁶ It was also evident in the statement released by the Second Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment at Rio+20 that was organized by the ITUC and Sustainlabour. After an intense debate among 400 delegates, the Assembly statement asserted that the current profit-driven system of production and consumption needs to be replaced, the commons defended, and energy brought into public ownership.⁵⁷ The Building Workers International (BWI) has warned that “the current

vativization, and financialization of nature, and all its components and functions.”

In 2013, 29 unions, including national trade union centers and Global Union Federations, came together to launch Trade Unions for Energy Democracy. TUED seeks to build a community of unions and allies that see the need to advocate strongly for public direction and social ownership of energy at the local to the global levels, to assist in laying the foundations for durable and effective alliances between unions and other social movements.⁵⁹ Unions like NUMSA in South Africa and CUPE in Canada are stepping up their own efforts to bring energy into public ownership and to renationalize what has been privatized.⁶⁰

“System Change” Needs Unions

Along with a science-based approach, the reassertion of public ownership is a crucial policy component of a trade union program to address climate change and the unsustainable character of today’s political economy. Although necessary, this will never be endorsed by UNEP and ILO, short of a major

ideological shift within those bodies. Importantly, unions will not be venturing into this space alone. Many social movements in the North and South—among them some key allies of the trade unions—have already rejected the “green economy” (sometimes referred to as the “greed economy”) and propose a more radical set of policies and approaches aimed at restoring the “social and ecological commons.” In some parts the left, the call for “system change” is every day getting louder. But the details of the transition are often unclear even at the level of theory. But this is beginning to change through debate and movement building.⁶¹

The key to mobilizing union members, workers, and individuals is for unions and their social movement allies to identify a series of bold interventions that can begin to address not just climate change but also the full spectrum of unsustainable and unjust features of political economy. A trade union approach to system change is therefore both transitional and transformative in nature, a perspective elaborated, for example, by COSATU in its 2011 submission to COP 17 in Durban.⁶² It also needs to be grounded in the historical traditions of economic democracy, worker cooperatives, credit unions, and mutualism, and it is these traditions that can now be deployed in the effort to reclaim the economy and protect the planet from certain destruction. A medium term goal, therefore, is to secure a qualitative shift towards public and social ownership of key economic sectors, particularly energy and electrical power generation; major transportation services; energy conservation through “climate jobs” and public works; and food production, distribution, and retail. The need for

action now, within the existing system, in no way negates the push for system change. On the contrary it brings the tipping point, whether economic and/or political, of system change closer.

Organizing and mobilizing union members will be easier if the perspective for a transformative transition is clear. Focusing on climate change as a distinct and separate issue is counterproductive. To connect with their own members unions will need to embed climate protection into the work they are presently doing to defend and promote workers’ rights, fight privatization, austerity, and defend public services, a message delivered with unique power by activist and writer Naomi Klein at the founding convention of the Canadian union UNIFOR in Toronto in early September 2013.⁶³ By integrating climate protection into their present battles, unions can broaden the social base of support for what they presently regard to be their “core agenda.” Furthermore, they can play a role in articulating a clear and inspiring alternative that amounts to a new ecological and economic development paradigm.

There are positive signs that this fusing of climate to hitherto “core” trade union concerns is beginning to happen. Unions are beginning to organize in this manner for the People’s Climate March in New York in September 2014 and for COP 20 in Lima, Peru, in early December 2014. In the case of New York, the city and the entire region was hit by superstorm Sandy in October 2012, an event that killed 40 people and disrupted mostly working class neighborhoods for months. Unions are not yet leading the climate movement from the front, but neither are they likely to be left behind.

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Developing Union Perspectives and Approaches

Sean Sweeney and Lara Skinner - June 2014

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