



Labor and Climate Change: A Briefing Paper for Activists

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Table of Contents

- In a Nutshell
- Background on American Labor
- A Climate Change Continuum
- The Building Trades
- Transportation
- Manufacturing Unions
- Service Sector, Public Sector, and Education Unions
- Labor Alliances
- Key Themes for Climate Change Activists Inside and Outside the Labor Movement
- Coal
- Just Transition
- Why Labor Must Act

This briefing paper provides a strategy for addressing organized labor's stake in climate change. Its goal is to provide activists inside and outside the labor movement with the information they need to help shape effective, worker friendly climate protection policies and garner support for them from organized labor.

The findings are based primarily on a detailed survey of the climate change record, self-interest, and decision making process of 17 labor organizations. These unions and federations were selected to reflect the range of industries, occupations, and organizational cultures of the US trade union movement. The results of these surveys were compiled into profiles which include basic information, analysis, contact data, and other relevant information. The complete profiles are over 300 pages. They draw on both available public information and on a series of private conversations with top union officials and other knowledgeable sources. And we have identified over 400 labor leaders at the local, regional and national level.

The findings also draw on contact with a broad swath of unions not surveyed in detail. Here we draw on scores of private conversations about climate change with top leaders, participation in many labor-oriented conferences on climate change, and decades of experience in the labor movement.

To make this information actionable, this briefing paper also provides an introduction to the structure and decision-making processes of the US labor movement that we hope will help newcomers navigate the complex world of organized labor.

In a Nutshell

Today the American labor movement—like the rest of American society and like labor movements throughout the world—is being forced to grapple with climate change and climate change mitigation.

Organized labor's approach to climate change is primarily employment based. Unions like the green job gains; but they fear the potential job losses from phasing out carbon fueled industries. This should not be surprising since unions are organized primarily to look after the specific employment interests of workers.

But a narrow focus on the short term has led some unions to neglect the longer term effects of climate change on jobs, workers, and their communities and the action needed to address them. Unless labor develops a full-fledged response to climate change it is likely to left by the roadside in what will be the pivotal challenge of the 21st century.

Why Should Workers and their Unions Be Concerned About Climate Change?

- the universal interest in protecting our planet that workers share with all people
- the threats of climate change to their own workplaces and the resulting economic devastation
- the positive interest of specific unions and groups of workers in more and better jobs
- the negative interest of specific unions and groups of workers whose jobs are threatened
- the interest of the labor movement as a whole in its overall social role and its alliances with other social groups

Labor has come a long way in the last two years. Today, almost all unions have a “green jobs” focus. Both national labor federations and many individual unions recognize the threat of climate change and call for policies to address it. The AFL-CIO has even established a Center for Green Jobs to promote green jobs, establish appropriate job standards, and help train workers to fill them.

But on the difficult question of transitioning away from existing high carbon energy sources and industries labor faces big challenges. Indeed it is important to remember that even the most far sighted trade union leaders have a very difficult job: They must represent the immediate interests of existing members, some of whom may face job losses in the transition to a low carbon economy, while keeping in mind the longer term social and ecological concerns.

Labor matters in the fight against climate change. Even in its weakened condition, it retains enough political clout to help or hinder the passage of meaningful climate change legislation. It will be up to activists inside and outside of the labor movement to help make clear labor’s stake in climate protection. That task begins with a clear understanding of the complicated dynamic around climate change in the labor movement.

While unions are bargaining opponents of their employers over wages and working conditions, they have a long tradition of building alliances with them over public policy issues that affect growth in their sectors. This too often leads unions to follow the narrow self-interest of their industry instead of developing independent positions representing the interests of labor as a whole.

A recent, and striking, example is the UAW’s long alliance with the big car companies in opposition to strong fuel economy standards – a policy which contributed not only to carbon emissions but to the current crisis in the American auto industry. Such shortsighted sectoral alliances can be a significant obstacle to drawing labor into the climate change fight.

But there are grounds for optimism. Although labor’s response has often been confused and contradictory, there is a growing awareness that re-tooling the energy and transportation infrastructure and retrofitting existing buildings to make them more energy efficient can both save the planet and create a new sustainable economy that will benefit all. One illustration of that change is the UAW’s support (along with ten auto companies) for the new, more stringent fuel economy standards proposed by President Obama in May, 2009.

Meeting the challenge posed by climate change will require some wrenching changes in the way we live and work. Navigating those changes in ways that result in a more sustainable, more just, society will require changes in public opinion, government policy, the economy, and technology. Change in the labor movement is part of that process: Labor can serve either as an accelerator or as a brake on the process as a whole.

Background on American Labor

The majority of union members, like the majority of Americans, undoubtedly are concerned about global warming. But the US labor movement has particular structural problems that make it difficult to confront broad social issues like global warming.

On the one hand, since the days of Samuel Gompers, founding president of the AFL in the 19th century, U.S. unions have represented particular groups of workers – first workers in the same craft, then increasingly workers in the same industry. On the other hand, the federations of unions – the AFL, the CIO, and more recently Change to Win – have in principle represented the interests of workers as a whole. This dual function at times produces a tension that can block action on key issues.

The Decision Making Process

The structure and history of the AFL-CIO—weak centralized authority with relatively autonomous affiliates – can make it difficult for the Federation to reach a position on important issues like climate change. As a result there is a tendency for the Federation to develop “least common denominator” positions on important issues. So far, this is the case with climate change mitigation. The Federation has focused on potential short term job gains and losses. This perspective results in a fairly straightforward position: Green jobs programs are good, carbon reduction programs are suspect.

The fear of job losses and declining memberships has led the AFL-CIO to take public positions at odds with the scientific consensus or the public interest. For instance, the AFL-CIO opposed signing the Kyoto treaty; it continues to oppose a timeline for tough global carbon emission standards; and it remains committed to expand coal-fired and nuclear electrical generation.

At the level of individual unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO, the picture is more complex. First, decision making in most trade unions—unlike the labor federations—is very centralized. In almost all of the unions we surveyed, especially the older industrial unions, national decision making power is concentrated in the hands of a union leadership and bureaucracy that is relatively closed and self-perpetuating. Leadership succession fights are rare since national officers are generally groomed and selected by those they replace. Broaching new issues can be difficult.

Second, a significant portion of the US labor movement is comprised of workers in service, education, and other jobs that are not directly impacted by carbon reduction programs in the short term, and these unions may take a more nuanced position or no position at all on key legislation. Motivating these unions to take positions on issues like climate change that they do not view as directly related to the immediate needs of their core constituency can be difficult.

It is important to bear in mind that the structure and tradition of organizational solidarity of the AFL-CIO mean that a small number of unions can exercise hegemony over policy decisions on specific issues like climate change. A strategy for changing labor’s position on climate protection can include helping unions to see that it is in their self interest to become part of the solution.

To further this picture is further complicated by a trend toward general unionism. As core union memberships within specific industries declined in recent years, unions began to organize workers wherever they could find them. The Mineworkers now represents school cafeteria workers; the Communication Workers represent nurses; the Laborers represents postal workers. This often produces even more contradictory relationships around issues like climate change within unions, as we will discuss below.

In 2005 seven unions split from the AFL-CIO to form Change to Win. This Federation is even more decentralized and less structured than the AFL-CIO. Some Change to Win unions like the Laborers and the Teamsters maintain memberships in specific AFL-CIO “constitutional” departments like the Building Trades Department. At the state and local level, many Change to Win members remain members of the AFL-CIO.

A Climate Change Continuum

The 57 unions that belong to the AFL-CIO, the five unions that belong to Change to Win, and the giant National Education Association (NEA), which belongs to neither, can be put on a rough continuum based on their immediate exposure to climate change mitigation policies. Those most impacted tend to be most active on climate change issues.

On one end of the continuum are unions involved in energy production like the Mineworkers, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and Utility Workers which represent power plant workers and the building trades workers who construct and maintain the energy infrastructure. Next are the transportation unions—rail, ports, trucking, airlines—that are impacted by energy prices and potentially by shifts in transportation policies to reduce carbon emissions. Further along the continuum are manufacturing unions that depend on cheap energy and/or that manufacture the components of the existing or emerging energy infrastructure. Least likely to be involved are unions in the service and education sectors that are only indirectly affected by climate change mitigation efforts.

While there is a strong correlation between policy impact and activism on climate issues, some highly impacted unions have been relatively silent, while some service sector unions have been more active. At the Copenhagen climate summit in December, 2009, for example, the Transport Workers (TWU), Service Employees (SEIU) and Laborers (LIUNA) issued statements supporting the greenhouse gas emissions reductions called for by climate scientists.

As we noted above, in this age of general unionism, unions often represent workers across a range of industries. Building trades unions may also represent workers in manufacturing, transportation, and even in services. Nevertheless it is still possible to group most unions according to the core constituencies that they represent. The next sections of this briefing paper review the

more specific climate-related interests and concerns of each of these broad sectors – what leads them to support or oppose climate protection measures. To further this picture is further complicated by a trend toward general unionism. As core union memberships within specific industries declined in recent years, unions began to organize workers wherever they could find them. The Mineworkers now represents school cafeteria workers; the Communication Workers represent nurses; the Laborers represents postal workers. This often produces even more contradictory relationships around issues like climate change within unions, as we will discuss below.

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The Building Trades

Building Trade Unions (Selected List):

- Sheet Metal Workers’ International Association (SMWIA)
- International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)
- Laborers’ International Union of North America (LIUNA)
- International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers (Boilermakers)

The building trades unions of the AFL-CIO are among the unions most immediately affected by climate change mitigation programs. They are also among the most active labor movement players on climate change issues. They have been enthusiastic backers of green jobs programs and in particular the green jobs components of the Obama stimulus package.

Most of the building trades unions, including some unions that do not belong to the AFL-CIO like the Teamsters and the Laborers, belong to the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO. The Building Trades Department has itself taken a strong position promoting green jobs.

Building trades unions like the Sheet Metal Workers, the Boilermakers Union, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) represent skilled workers that both build and maintain the energy and transportation infrastructure and construct big buildings that consume large amounts of energy. These jobs include everything from power plant construction to installing boilers and heating and air conditioning systems to maintaining the electrical grid.

Big capital intensive projects depend on public funding and regulatory support. Not surprisingly, even relatively small building trades unions spend a great deal of money on national and local political campaigns and lobbying. For instance, the 150,000 Sheet Metal Workers Union is the 37th largest political contributor in the country.

Building trades operate under a unique set of rules within US labor law. In many ways they are similar to temp agencies in that they dispatch skilled workers, including front line supervisors, to employers for time limited projects. In effect, the building trades unions organize employers rather than workers by getting employers to sign “pre-hire agreements”. These agreements

set the wages and working conditions for workers before the job begins and before any workers are hired. Then the union selects and dispatches workers to a job on an as-needed basis. Pre-hire agreements are only legal in the construction and maritime trades where work is project based. In all other sectors of the economy unions must organize workers already on a job and win a majority vote in a government supervised election or get an employer to voluntarily recognize a union based on some other measurement of employee wishes.

One consequence of this unique arrangement is that building trades unions develop very close relationships with contractors with whom they do business. Unions and contractors work together on industry lobbying and on efforts to attract new work. Unions often belong to industry associations and jointly sponsor meetings and reports on industry-specific issues.

Unions and employers also operate joint apprenticeship programs to train journeymen workers. These apprenticeship programs—generally licensed by the states—serve to regulate the entry of new workers into a trade. In the past these programs were often used to exclude minorities and women and to perpetuate family and ethnic continuity within a trade. Allegations that unions blocked the hiring of minorities and women generally stem from the building trades where unions actually have a say in the hiring process. Such discrimination has been widely condemned in the labor movement and is now generally outlawed.

Green jobs are widely considered a route out of the current recession in the labor movement, but especially in the building trades, which have been hard hit by the downturn in building. Building trades unions regard the construction of wind, solar, biofuel, and hydro-thermal alternative energy sources as a potential bright spot. A recent report, widely cited by the building trades, supports the widespread view that the building trades will benefit from the switch to green power alternatives. The report—Green Recovery: A Program to Create Good Jobs and Start Building a Low Carbon Economy http://www.peri.umass.edu/green_recovery/—done by UMass’s Political Economy Research for the Center for American Progress—claims that a \$100 billion green economic recovery package would create 800,000 construction jobs, a majority of which will pay decent wages (over \$16 per hour). Most of the jobs would be in already existing occupations and would be geographically dispersed. Areas where the stimulus money should be focused, according to the report, are in sectors that currently employ trades workers, including:

- retrofitting buildings to improve energy efficiency
- expanding mass transit and freight rail
- constructing ‘smart’ electrical grid transmission systems
- wind power
- solar power
- next-generation biofuels

The report influenced the Obama’s stimulus package, which received strong backing from the trades.

Green training is now standard in apprenticeship and post-apprenticeship training throughout the construction industry. Building trades unions are also active lobbying at the national, state, and local level for the permitting of alternative power sources such as wind farms. High level meetings have been held at the White House with strong union participation for programs like the Emerald City Program to get energy efficiency projects up and running.

The Building Trades worry that some new construction could be non-union, but think that they are positioned to “capture” new jobs in their core industries and geographic localities because they can provide highly skilled workers already up to speed on new technologies.

Nonetheless, the Building Trades continue to strongly support the expansion of conventional fossil fuel and nuclear based power sources. The construction and maintenance of existing energy sources employs significant numbers of trades workers. Holding on to these jobs is a union priority.

A new awareness about climate change is emerging within building trades unions, however. This is reflected by Boilermakers Union president Newton Jones, who recently said, “The long-term prospects for a warmer planet are not pleasant to contemplate. By now we’re all familiar with the danger . . . rising sea levels...heavy storms, changing rainfall patterns, drought in some areas, excessive rains in others, crop failures.” He believes it is “economic suicide for labor unions to ignore or minimize the potential negative effects of the world’s use of fossil fuels.”

Building Trades delegations have participated in international climate change meetings like the Copenhagen climate summit in December, 2009 where they have been exposed to the international dimensions of the climate change issue and to a broader range of perspectives.

Transportation

Transportation is the second biggest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions after electricity generation. The US transportation system alone produces more greenhouse gasses than any country in the world except China. About one half of the transportation emissions comes from commercial transportation—trucks, planes, ships, rail, and busses. The other half comes from private automobiles.

Serious efforts to combat climate change will include changes in the transportation and logistics industries that will have major impacts—both positive and negative—on employment in key industries. Unions representing transportation workers in trucking, rail, ports, busses, mass transit, and airlines will have to address these changes. The 2008 spike in fuel prices provided a harbinger of the kind of changes that could occur. Airlines and trucking companies cut back; rail traffic and mass transit ridership increased; logistics industries sought new efficiencies in an economy increasingly dependent on complex global and national supply chains.

Transportation Unions? (Selected List)

- International Brotherhood of Teamsters
- Amalgamated Transit Workers union
- Transport Workers Union
- United Transportation Union
- Intl Longshoremen's/
Warehousemen's Union

Union density in the transportation industry is much higher than in the economy as a whole. Overall almost 25% of all transport workers are unionized, compared with 7.4% of the entire private sector. Seventy-four percent of railroad workers are unionized; 50 % of airline workers belong to unions; density in local trucking hovers around 20%. Some sectors however, such long distance trucking, are virtually non-union.

As is often the case in the US labor movement, non-transport unions also have pockets of membership in the industry. For instance, some of the craft unions of the building trades such as the Sheet Metal Workers, the Boilermakers, and the IBEW represent workers employed in those crafts by railroads. A variety of unions representing transportation workers have weighed in politically on the stimulus package and its provisions for improvements in the transportation infrastructure, such as high speed rail. But the most active union—and the pivotal union on climate change issues—is probably the Teamsters Union.

The Teamsters have been losing union density in the trucking industry for years, but over the last decade some of these losses have been offset by new organizing and mergers with existing unions in rail, airlines, ports, and buses. As a result, today the Teamsters is much more a general transport union than it has ever been.

In transportation there has long been a competition for scarce public and private funding for infrastructure maintenance and development among trucking, railroads, airlines, and shipping/ports. This sectoral competition has the potential to pit Teamster union members in different transportation sectors against each other.

The Teamsters seek to avoid these conflicts by casting themselves as a “supply chain union,” that is, as the representative of workers at every link of the global supply chain from ports to distribution centers to rail to trucks to the final customer.

This rebranding has been accompanied by new thinking on creating intermodal systems that maximize efficiencies, and thereby reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The union believes that an efficient intermodal system could actually increase employment in sectors where the union has a presence. The big loser would be the inefficient over-the-road long distance trucking sector which is non-union and generally consists of very low wage, high turnover jobs.

Supporting this kind of big systemic thinking should be a key aim of climate change advocacy. It should be noted also that the Teamsters have demonstrated a rare capacity to take the long view even when it seems to conflict with some of the union's short term interests. For example, after being an enthusiastic supporter for years, the Teamsters pulled out of the coalition in support of oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Union president Hoffa said:

“Global warming is for real. Air pollution is killing people and making our children sick. And you know what? We share some of the blame. In the past, we

were forced to make a false choice. The choice was: Good Jobs or a Clean Environment. We were told no pollution meant no jobs. If we wanted clean air, the economy would suffer and jobs would be sent overseas. Well guess what? We let the big corporations pollute and the jobs went overseas anyway. We didn't enforce environmental regulations and the economy still went in the toilet. The middle class got decimated and the environment is on the brink of disaster. Well I say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! No more false divides. The future, if we are to prosper as a nation, will lie in a green economy....”

The UAW is a manufacturing union, but its fate is deeply tied up with transportation policy. Half of the greenhouse gasses emitted in transportation are from private automobiles.

In the post-war period up to the 1950s the UAW attempted to pressure the big car companies to produce smaller cars. But the union was consistently rebuffed by the companies that jealously guarded their management prerogatives. Over time the union dropped its efforts to influence product development. Instead for decades the UAW aligned itself with the big carmakers fighting against mileage standards. As a result, the UAW was perceived as part of the problem and not part of the solution and this contributed to the lack of public support for the union when the car companies collapsed.

The collapse of the American automobile industry and the announcement of new fuel economy standards by the Obama administration could be a game changer for the UAW. If it is to survive, the union will have to reposition itself on fuel standards and low carbon technology generally and this may offer opportunities for future alliances with climate change activists. It has taken some steps in this direction, such as supporting higher fuel efficiency standards and proposed climate legislation.

Manufacturing Unions

Manufacturing Unions (Selected List):

- International Association of Machinists
- International Union of Electrical Workers-Communication Workers of America
- United Auto Workers

A range of unions represent manufacturing workers who will be directly impacted by climate change and climate change mitigation. These unions are becoming more politically active on climate issues.

Manufacturing unions have been battered by globalization and outsourcing, and they approach efforts to deal with climate change through this lens. These unions link the green jobs issue with efforts to revive domestic manufacturing in the US. As a result they place major emphasis on trade issues and on “buy America” clauses in stimulus and subsidy projects.

Many of these unions fear increased energy costs resulting from climate change mitigation policies will hurt the competitive position of US industries. For instance, manufacturing unions in the mid-west—a region that depends on coal fired power plants for cheap energy—worry those restrictions on coal use will force more jobs overseas. The AFL-CIO's reluctance to back global standards for carbon emissions that do not include tough standards for China,

India, and the developing world stems in part from this fear. This preoccupation comes in spite of the fact that the US produces far more greenhouse gases per capita than any other country in the world.

Unions representing workers producing components used in conventional power generation worry that climate policy may cause job loss. But manufacturing unions are also heavily promoting government programs to create green jobs and new products for the green economy. Unions regularly tout in their public relations materials the green products that their members are producing.

A critical issue here is whether the new jobs will be union jobs or whether they will be low paying jobs. A recent report by Good Jobs First, “High Road or Low Road: Job Quality in the New Green Economy,” reports that many new green jobs are either low wage or below existing standards. We will discuss the union involvement with green job standards below.

Service Sector, Public Sector, and Education Unions

Service and Public Unions (Selected List):

- Service Employees International
- American Federation of Teachers
- American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
- UNITE-HERE
- National Education Association

Service sector, public sector and education unions represent a major part of the US labor movement. These unions tend to be less immediately impacted by climate change mitigation policies.

Nevertheless some unions, such as Service Employees and the plumbers, have established climate change programs within their unions and have begun to consider the long range collective bargaining impacts of climate change policies.

Educational unions have also begun to address green issues particularly around the greening of schools. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) for example is pushing for LEED certification standards for schools. And the AFT supports H.R. 3021, the 21st Century Green High-Performing Public School Facilities Act, passed by the House and awaiting action in the Senate, which would authorize \$6.4 billion annually to help states and school districts promote retrofitting to create healthier, environmentally-friendly schools. Unions say it will create 100,000 construction jobs. The National Education Association (NEA) is also promoting the need for green schools.

Unions like UNITE HERE in the tourism industry are likely to be affected in the short to medium term as increases in energy and transportation costs alter tourist behavior. The increase in energy costs in 2008 was harbinger of more permanent changes to come. Already the hotel industry is taking steps to “green” their operations through new energy efficiency programs. Hurricane Katrina devastated the tourist industry and unions in New Orleans. But to date UNITE HERE has not developed positions on climate change.

Public sector and health care unions will face the general impact of climate change in specific ways. For example, extreme weather events, pandemics, and other climate-change related disasters are likely to test ability of institutions to respond and create stress and strains on workers and their communities that will raise significant health, safety, and other workplace issues.

Labor Alliances

Some of the most advanced labor response to climate change comes from two independent labor based alliances: the the Apollo Alliance and the Blue-Green Alliance.

The Apollo Alliance, founded early in the 21st century, counts more than 30 unions, along environmental organizations, community based groups, and businesses as its allies. Its initial focus was on developing industrial policies to promote alternative energy and energy independence but it has since expanded its mandate to include climate change. Its broad membership, however, may restrict its activities on carbon reduction.

The Blue-Green Alliance was organized in 2006 by the Sierra Club and the Steelworkers Union. It has recently added six additional union members—Communications Workers, Service Workers Laborers, American Federation of Teachers, Transit Workers, and Utility Workers—as well as the National Resources Defense Council. It has emerged as the main alternative voice of labor in the climate change debate. The Blue-Green Alliance draws a wide range of unions to its annual meetings and to other events. Its includes a Labor Climate Project.

The Blue Green Policy Statement on Climate Change Legislation released on March 27, 2009 includes the following.

- Sets a target of 80% reduction by 2050, with an interim goal of between 14% and 25% of 2005 levels by 2020 depending on the BGA member's target.
- An economy wide cap and trade program which addresses domestic and international disparities and impacts.
- A major commitment to new green jobs including a follow-up to the current stimulus package.
- Programs to deal with regional and class based impact inequalities.
- An international climate change regime that prevents carbon outsourcing and job migration.
- An allowance allocation system based on auctions and the “public good” that minimizes leakages overseas and includes a just transition program.
- Basic standard setting for emissions, low carbon fuels, renewable, and energy efficiency.

- Money for R&D.
- International investment and technology transfers to help developing countries meet climate change goals.
- Money for adaption programs for areas where climate change is already having an effect.
- Government financing for the transition.

A statement made for the December, 2008 Copenhagen statement repeated many of these goals but did not include targets for greenhouse gas reductions for 2020, instead calling only for “meaningful reductions by 2020.”

Key Themes for Climate Change Activists Inside and Outside the Labor Movement

Labor’s focus on employment means that there is no need to convince labor to support green jobs and alternative energy programs. They already understand this. But green jobs are not enough: The task for climate change activists is to help unions see that carbon reduction is in their interest.

Change starts with education about what science shows is necessary to protect the planet. Unions reflect the general ambiguity of public opinion on climate change. A March, 2009 Gallop poll shows that 61% of the public does not believe that global warming will seriously affect them in their lifetime. 51% of the public thinks economic growth should have priority even if the environment suffers to some extent. About 42% think the environment should be given priority. Wishful thinking about the extent of the threat posed by climate change gives unions, as well as other institutions, leeway to pursue dangerous short-term self interests.

Talking to Labor About Climate Change:

- Focus on the inevitability of climate change mitigation policies and the changes they will cause.
- Explore the positive aspects of this change: massive new investment is needed to completely transform the energy and transportation infrastructure, producing millions of new jobs.
- Forthrightly confront the negative aspects of the change for labor: Some jobs will be lost. Unions need to step forward with transition plans to deal with job loss and economic dislocation.
- Point out that inaction on climate change will lead to drastic consequences and the necessity for far more disruptive climate protection measures in the not-too-distant future.
- Unions are going to need allies to ensure that green jobs are good jobs and that labor and employment standards are included in subsidy programs.

It is possible to have green jobs, energy independence—and a high carbon economy. The necessity for climate protection can be obscured when the emphasis in policy debates—both in the labor movement and in mainstream political discourse—focuses primarily on “energy policy” or “energy independence.” If climate change is mentioned only in asides, eliminating carbon emitting power sources can be downplayed. Unions can seem green while they protect coal and other dirty fuels. Activists need to help labor focus on the need to protect the livelihoods of union members and their communities in ways that also effectively protect the climate.

Coal

Coal is a salient issue for labor. From the miners who dig it up to the railroad workers and truckers who transport it to the power plant workers who use it to produce almost half of the nation’s electricity to the manufacturing workers who depend on cheap power—coal touches a whole range of workers and their unions.

Labor’s current coal policy can be summarized as follows: Clean coal will work in the long run. Although clean coal technology isn’t here yet we need to go on expanding coal-generated electricity despite its carbon footprint because we need abundant cheap energy. Therefore we can’t limit greenhouse gasses now but will have to wait until clean coal is available.

The problem with this position is that almost all knowledgeable sources agree that technology for producing “clean coal” at a commercial scale and cost does not exist and even if it can be developed is, in the best case scenario, well over a decade away from being operational and affordable, and even further into the future before enough “clean” plants could be built to replace existing ones. By that time the climate could be irreversibly devastated.

Labor doesn’t have to oppose the search for clean coal technology; but it is in labor’s interest to 1) support reductions in carbon emissions without waiting for clean coal, and 2) limit “clean coal policy” to research, rather than vast sums for building facilities that may hypothetically be retrofitted to be clean some day in the distant future. Labor will gain far more high-quality jobs from investing in renewable energy and conservation.

Coal policy stands in the way of labor backing tough global emissions limits and it complicates global approaches by labor to climate change in a number of other ways. For instance, even unions like the Steelworkers that have led the way in so many areas on confronting global warming have been reluctant to agree to carbon reduction targets or support legislation that does not tax Chinese steel imports at the border. The reason: Chinese steel production uses dirtier coal than US production, putting US producers at a competitive disadvantage.

The AFL-CIO does not see a contradiction between coal and climate change mitigation. In fact, the Federation regularly promotes “clean coal” alternatives as part of its “green” agenda.

The AFL-CIO and most unions now support the revised Waxman-Markey Bill that emerged from the House Energy and Commerce Committee in May, 2009 --not because it provides strong protection of the environment, but because its cap and trade provisions were significantly weakened by proposals to give free carbon allowances to polluting industries. This change allowed even the United Mineworkers—which has been implacable in its opposition to climate change legislation—to praise the bill.

Just Transition

Environmentalists regularly tout the employment prospects for green jobs. Many studies show that over time transitioning to a low carbon economy will create hundreds of thousands more green jobs than will be lost in the phase out of carbon based energy. But for specific workers, unions, and communities the transition will mean job loss and dislocation. The key to winning workers and unions to climate change action are “just transition strategies” that address the needs of workers and communities impacted by the phase out of high carbon industries.

Whether labor supports strong climate change legislation or not depends on whether labor believes in the possibility of a just transition or whether labor instead chooses to fight to maintain the status quo and block a transition to a low-carbon economy.

But just transition strategies are a tough sell. The US has no real tradition of industrial policy that would allow unions (and workers) to imagine a shift of this magnitude. Previous transition strategies for adjusting to economic change, for instance trade adjustment policies, have been very weak, usually amounting to little more than extended unemployment benefits and job training for jobs that often don't exist.

Effective just transition strategies will have to address the needs of whole industries and communities if they are to be embraced by workers and their unions. The current government supported downsizing of the auto industry, which offers little in the way of help for impacted communities, is an example of why workers and unions are cynical about industrial transitions. And the transition provisions of the Waxman-Markey bill seem to follow the basic formula of past—and ineffective—transition plans.

Labor itself must take the initiative in developing worker friendly industrial policies and build the political alliances needed to promote them. The policies must promote low carbon measures and just transition programs for workers and their communities. The shape of the policies can vary: Some can be in TVA-style development programs that take a broad regional approach in hard hit areas like the Appalachian coal fields or Detroit and the Rust Belt. Some can be sectoral initiatives in areas like energy production, transportation, and building. All of the policies should address global issues to avoid carbon outsourcing, reduce transportation emissions, and prevent destructive and counterproductive trade wars.

Ways need to be found to get conversations and research moving in these areas where they are not already underway.

Why Labor Must Act

Unions understand that green jobs could be the road to labor's revival. But unions need to support the policies that create the green jobs. Both their long and short term interests are served by being part of the solution to the climate crisis.

Change is coming. The prospective growth in green jobs is a direct result of efforts to deal with climate change. That requires cutting carbon emissions. If unions want to insure worker friendly laws and transition strategies and opportunities to unionize the new jobs, they will need alliances with environmentalists and broad public and political support. Opposing carbon reduction will undercut that support in the medium and long term.

Unfortunately, the largely middle class environmental movement and corporate backed politicians have shown little sensitivity to the interests of labor as they proposed public policy responses to climate change. Many have been quick to advocate carbon reduction programs, but slow to offer up any ideas about what will happen to the workers and communities affected. But the good news is that some environmental organizations like the Sierra Club and NRDC have built alliances with labor and have worked to support labor issues like the Employee Free Choice Act.

To insure that new green jobs are high wage union jobs there needs to be strong wage and labor standards in all public works and public subsidy programs. Indeed, as a recent Good Jobs First report shows, many of the new green manufacturing jobs are either low wage or under union rates. In addition, like other jobs, many green jobs can be outsourced to low wage areas around the world. Already, a lot of the work previously thought to be outsource-proof, like the manufacturing of giant windmill blades, is going to China and Asia. A sustainable industrial policy is needed to find a global balance.

As the effects of climate change become more and more apparent, the pressure to counter it will grow more intense. The potential for unions to gain from green jobs and worker-friendly environmental policies is great – but it is unlikely to be realized unless unions help take the lead in fighting for effective climate protection.