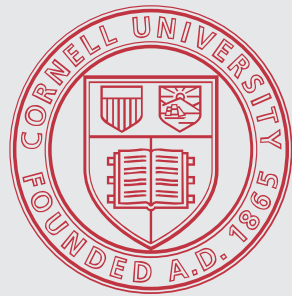




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Cornell University
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DISCUSSION PAPER

The Durban Challenge: How Unions Can Help Secure a Binding Global Climate Agreement in 2011

Prepared for the Cornell Global Labor Institute and the Labor Network for Sustainability

By Sean Sweeney

The international trade union movement has given little-heralded but significant support for a deal that protects the earth's climate while providing a "just transition" that protects working people around the world. Sean Sweeney argues that, as the world approaches make-or-break negotiations in Durban, South Africa in December, 2011, labor can a critical role in supporting climate protection – and in ensuring the kinds of policies that will make climate protection a centerpiece of building a more worker-friendly global economy.

Table of Contents

- Labor calls on the COPs
- Just Transition and the UN Process
- Science and Solidarity
- What Happened to the Green New Deal?
- One, Two, Many Durbans

Sean Sweeney is the Director and founder of the Global Labor Institute at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) based in New York City. He is the co-author of the UN Environment Program's report, *Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable, Low-Carbon World* that was sponsored by the ITUC and the ILO. The Global Labor Institute and the Labor Network for Sustainability collaborate on a variety of projects involving sustainability, climate, and labor.

With no fanfare and just a little private celebration, the international trade union movement registered a measurable impact on the UN climate talks in Cancun in early December, ensuring that the principle of “a just transition for the workforce” was referenced in the Cancun outcome document. A cohort of several hundred labor representatives organized by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) will now spend 2011 preparing for the big December showdown in Durban where efforts will focus on securing a global climate deal. Unions around the world aim to make sure that Durban will not be a tragic repeat of the failed Copenhagen meeting in 2009. And while some progress was made in Cancun on some key issues – such as climate financing, technology transfer, and deforestation – the major obstacle remains, as always, the question of emissions reductions.

Victory in Durban may therefore depend on a different approach, one that involves unions working with other social movements throughout 2011 to turn Durban into a rallying point. A targeted “inside” strategy could be complemented by an “outside” approach involving many thousands either in Durban itself or in their own communities back home. This in turn will require unions to do more to connect the economic crisis with the climate crisis, uniting around the principle that the present economic system abuses people and the environment in equal measure and therefore must be changed. Moreover, working to resolve the climate crisis also provides opportunities to address the economic crisis, because the more ambitious the emission reductions commitments, the greater the number of “climate jobs” that are likely to be created across the economy and the greater the opportunities for unions and communities to exert democratic control over climate protection measures.

Labor calls on the COPs

Unions have been attending the UN’s annual “Conference of the Parties” (COP) in growing numbers in recent years. Cancun was the 16th such meeting; thus COP 16. Durban will be COP17 – but that could be the end of the road if no agreement comes together. Roughly 200 trade unionists from all over the world joined the ITUC’s COP 16 delegation. The ITUC represents 176 million organized workers in 151 countries. It has 301 affiliated labor centers.

Labor's presence at the recent COPs has helped swell the army of progressive organizations and social movements who are pressing hard for a fair, ambitious and binding global agreement when the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Unions not only acknowledge the huge threat posed by global warming to existing jobs and livelihoods, they also realize that dealing with the climate crisis presents an opportunity to bring about a fundamental shift in the course of economic development. The climate crisis has politicized the future in a unique and mostly unexpected way. Decisions taken (or avoided) in the next few years are likely to have serious long term implications for workers and for human civilization in general.

Just Transition and the UN Process

Meanwhile, the ITUC's intervention in Cancun was successful on two fronts. Firstly, it helped restore the integrity of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as the best way of achieve and implement an effective new global climate agreement and, secondly, it made sure that the agreement acknowledges the demands of workers for a "Just Transition." While some unions can expect their members to do well by climate protection, policies are needed to protect those workers who risk losing jobs or income in the transition to a low-carbon economy.

These successes did not come easily. Unions had to lobby tenaciously for workers interests to be expressed in the key negotiation "Shared Vision" document, but the work paid off. Governments formally recognized the importance of *"promoting a just transition of the workforce, the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities and strategies and contributing to building new capacity for both production and service-related jobs in all sectors, promoting economic growth and sustainable development."* Given the pro-business sympathies of the governments anchoring the UN process, and the mostly baseless confidence in 'market solutions' to global warming, the inclusion of this language is no small achievement. Keeping the language in the agreement will be the ITUC's primary goal in the year ahead.

Unions have regarded the survival of the UN process as important for two reasons; firstly, the "polluter pays" equity principles embodied in

the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol mean that any future deal could be positive for workers and poor countries in particular and, secondly, the UN process is unique in that it invites the input and participation of social movements and broader civil society. Throughout 2010 and in Cancun, trade unions played their part in reviving a global process that teetered on the point of collapse after last year's disastrous COP 15 in Denmark when the "Copenhagen Accord" was introduced by the U.S. and a few other countries in the final hours of the conference. "Noted" but not adopted by the countries at COP 15, the Accord sought to replace legally binding emissions reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol in favor of voluntary commitments. While the UN process was rescued, the US-driven idea of voluntary commitments made considerable headway in Cancun.

Developing countries put up little resistance to the softer approach to emissions targets for essentially two reasons. Firstly, no country wished to be blamed for the diplomatic train-wreck that would have occurred had there been no agreement emerging from Cancun and, secondly, there was enough language in the text to allow the developing countries to say something of value was accomplished. The launch of a Climate Fund to help poor countries adapt to climate change and lower their own emissions trajectories is a case in point. It remains unclear how the \$100 billion "goal" established by developed countries will be reached, and it is hoped that work during 2011 will provide some direction on this front. Rich countries have made overseas development assistance commitments for years which are routinely never honored; why would anything change?

The battle between binding or voluntary emissions reductions will be a key feature of the negotiations in the months ahead, but for now the adoption of the "Cancun Agreements" (opposed only by Bolivia) has revived hopes that the UN process can still deliver. Unions and social movements nevertheless recognize that, in diplomatic terms, Cancun was a walk on the beach and that Durban will be a snake pit by comparison.

Science and Solidarity

Supported by global labor, the "Bali Action Plan" adopted at COP 13 in 2007 called for deep cuts in emissions consistent with the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). According to

The Durban Challenge How Unions Can Help Secure a Binding Global Climate Agreement in 2011

the IPCC, this would require developed countries to reduce their emissions by 25-40% on 1990 levels by 2020. However, the “Cancun Agreements” has perhaps made it easier for the rich countries to move away from the Kyoto Protocol and science-based and binding reduction commitments and to install a voluntary system whereby each country announces the emissions reductions it intends to make—which is consistent with the approach of the Copenhagen Accord. The Cancun text “takes note” of the pledges by the developed countries under the Accord, but calls for them to be increased in line with the levels identified by the IPCC. The pledges made under the Accord a year ago have, nevertheless, become recognized as a starting point for the discussion on emission reduction commitments and will feature in the various meetings in the lead up to Durban.

As the Cancun gathering dispersed, ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow called on Governments to “raise their sights by the time of the next meeting in Durban in 2011” fully aware that the Accord’s developed country pledges amount to (at best) a 16% reduction on 1990 levels by 2020, putting the world on course to achieve three to five degrees Celsius or 5.4 to 9 degrees Fahrenheit of global warming by year 2100. The consequences of this level of warming are almost unimaginable. Unions around the world will be concerned to make sure that binding science-based commitments are not replaced by voluntary commitments that are completely inadequate.

The ITUC has consistently fought for science-based emissions reductions targets for 2020 and 2050. It has thus far repelled internal pressure (mostly from some U.S. unions) to discard the 2020 target, believing that a science-based approach to climate protection is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, emissions reduction commitments that fall short of what is needed (like those offered under the Copenhagen Accord) are unacceptable. Bargaining with nature is simply not an option. Secondly, ambitious targets can anchor a Green New Deal by creating a lot of good quality jobs and restructuring economic life around the needs of both people and the environment. Thirdly, a pro-science position means the ITUC can stand in solidarity with the people who are already feeling the impact of global warming, including the estimated 150 million “climate refugees” who have been forced to leave their homes because they can no longer grow crops due to disappearing glaciers, or have been displaced due to droughts, flooding, and climate-induced diseases like malaria. For many (mostly poor) countries and regions, the impact of climate change is already severe.

The Durban Challenge How Unions Can Help Secure a Binding Global Climate Agreement in 2011

International labor also supports the principle embodied in the UNFCCC that governments should act to protect the climate system “on the basis of equality and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.” [1] Rich countries today are responsible for more than 60 percent of annual emissions even though only 20 percent of the global population lives in those countries. Developed countries are also responsible for 80 percent of the cumulative emissions that are causing climate change today and will do 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. [2] However, emissions are also growing rapidly in the larger developing countries. Today China is the largest emitter (though certainly not in per capita terms), and most of the future growth in emissions will come from the developing world. Responding to climate change will therefore require actions be taken by developing countries to first slow their emissions trajectories and then reduce emissions over the longer term. There is a role for developed countries in supporting developing countries to meet this challenge through the transfer of low-emission technologies.

The ITUC’s solidly internationalist stance has created a framework for engagement that deserves support and reinforcement from national labor federations and individual unions. The now-or-never nature of the Durban meeting thus provides an opportunity for labor to show that it is a global movement that sees climate protection as an important component of a new development model.

Unions in the U.S. have a particularly important role to play. The “voluntary commitments” approach proposed by the Copenhagen Accord has been supported by the AFL-CIO and the Blue Green Alliance, reflecting concerns that U.S. manufacturing and energy-sector jobs could be threatened by a global deal that attempted to reduce emissions at a speed that would bring pressures to bear on U.S. employers. However, unions representing 2.9 million workers have come out in favor of the ITUC’s position supporting both science-based reductions and a binding global agreement, namely the Laborer’s, Transport Workers Union, Utility Workers and SEIU. Throughout 2011, unions will have numerous opportunities to make it clear to the White House and the State

1. UNFCCC
2. World Resources Institute, Climate Change and Developing Countries, See: <http://archive.wri.org/page.cfm?id=1284&z=?>

Department that the U.S., which never signed the Kyoto Protocol, can show real leadership on climate protection and drive the green economy at the same time.

What Happened to the Green New Deal?

The strong stance taken by global labor on climate now needs to be turned into action, and here is where things get more complicated. An important feature of the present crisis is how quickly social democratic responses to the economic crisis have fizzled out. Stimulus money helped turn a terrible jobs situation into a bad one, but the measures did not alter the overall course of events. For example, in the U.S. the crisis wiped out 8 million jobs. Studies show that had the stimulus not been implemented the number would have been 16 to 17 million. And now municipal and state governments are slashing public spending and many face bankruptcy, so more jobs will be shed. When former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd talked of “regime change” in February 2009, he announced that the end of the neoliberal era had arrived and a new period of social democratic political economy was about to commence. Two years on, having taken a vacation at the taxpayer’s expense, extreme capitalism is back behind the wheel.

This unexpected turn of events means that unions must quickly reevaluate the situation, and climate policy is one area where the need for a re-evaluation is particularly urgent. In recent years global labor has worked on the premise that the “real-world” historical options are essentially twofold. Either humanity will transition to some form of “green capitalism” where economic growth is de-linked from emissions and environmental destruction generally, or we face a “suicide capitalism” scenario where fossil-fuel corporations and major industrial, agriculture, transport, and retail interests are successful in maintaining business as usual. The main champions of green capitalism, such as Lord Stern, maintain 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 will, over time, cohere into a global carbon market. The ITUC and its main affiliates have stood on the left of this discussion, supporting green capitalism against the polluters, but also advocating for a Green New Deal grounded in workers’ rights, labor standards, investments in infrastructure and a strong public sector. Unions do not oppose carbon markets *per se*, but neither do they regard them as some kind of magical antitoxin that can cleanse the system of its polluting ways.

Clearly, the prospects for either a market-driven green capitalism or one packaged by a Global Green New Deal have taken a big hit as a result of the aggressive neoliberal response on the part of many governments to the Great Recession, and the likelihood for some kind of eco-Keynesian shift in macroeconomic policy today appears very remote. And the ocean will have swallowed the Maldives (and perhaps half of Florida) long before a global carbon market sees the light of day. If Copenhagen was not green capitalism's political Waterloo, it was certainly a major setback. Without a "climate Bretton Woods" of some kind to fast-track green investments, the planet's atmosphere will continue to be the dumping ground for the big emitters and billions of people will pay a heavy price in the years to come.

One, Two, Many Durbans

The poor prospects for green capitalism raise important strategic, tactical and programmatic issues for unions. A Green New Deal seems unlikely to occur absent a sustained degree of mass pressure from unions and other social movements, and even then it could not sustain itself without bold state interventions built around long-term public investments and a major expansion of the public sector. This could constitute the basis of a political program around which unions can address the jobs crisis and the climate crisis simultaneously, and in a forward-looking way that builds unions and strengthens alliances.

Encouragingly, the trade union led mobilizations against austerity measures in a number of countries in recent months has shown that workers are willing to wage defensive struggles. Connecting a strong climate and environmental dimension to these actions can provide an opportunity to more closely connect unions with the movements that have been built around these issues. Moreover, it would allow unions to transcend "stop the cuts" defensive positions with a set of proposals that can point to a truly sustainable future grounded in quality employment, social solidarity, environmental sustainability, and economic democracy. In September 2010, the Global Union Federations came together to launch the "Quality Public Services" campaign, which makes the connection between climate protection and the need for a strong public sector. David Cockroft, general secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation, said the new campaign would start in selected cities as "a rallying point for the industrial and political power of the global union movement."

The Durban Challenge How Unions Can Help Secure a Binding Global Climate Agreement in 2011

For labor, the more things stay the same the greater the need to make serious change. Unions still have power, but the direction of recent events—and thirty years of recent history—means that this power will not last forever. A Green New Deal with jobs, a strong public sector, and democratic control at its core can serve as a way to mobilize unions and other social movements behind a framework of radical restructuring of the economy. Unions everywhere can help ensure that labor’s “inside” strategy in Durban is backed by an “outside” approach—and integrating climate and environment into trade union demands around the defense of public services and social protections amounts to doing just that. Being in Durban for the COP is also important. In many respects Durban provides the perfect venue for a Seattle-like show of urgency. Coal-dependent South Africa is the world’s most unequal society where 43% of the population lives on less than \$2 per day; unemployment seldom drops below 35% and more than 60% of the unemployed have never had a job. However, its unions still have the capacity to get workers into the streets. Last August 1.3 million public sector workers engaged in a national strike over pay, the largest strike in years.

Furthermore, the climate justice movement was launched in Durban a few years ago and is helping to articulate and organize around climate, environment and the need for economic and social justice in new and innovative ways. Plans for a “People’s COP” are being developed, but there is still a lot of organizing to be done if Durban is to become a rallying point for unions and their allies. At COP 15 in Copenhagen 100,000 people chanted “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 deal 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 discussions outside of the main proceedings. For Durban, the issue is not the size of the demonstration, but whether or not the opportunity will be taken to bring the issues being discussed (or ignored) in Durban to union halls, communities and gatherings around the world.

Clearly, climate protection is not a peripheral issue for workers or unions. Those who see it that way have perhaps yet to grasp either the severity of the climate crisis or the opportunities addressing it presents for unions. A recent document on climate change released by the International Transport Workers Federation expresses it clearly, “The political and social solutions that need to be applied to address both the causes

The Durban Challenge **How Unions Can Help Secure a** **Binding Global Climate** **Agreement in 2011**

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. Global warming emissions are a symptom of a systemic problem...what is needed is a new economy that is driven by broad social and environmental priorities, one held together by human cooperation and social solidarity.”