



LABOR NETWORK  
FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Discussion Paper

# Climate Protection Strategy: Beyond Business-as-Usual

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## Table of Contents

- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- 1. The problem
- 2. A false solution: Abandon ghg reduction and call it climate protection
- 3. A real solution: An independent global movement
- 4. How an independent movement can incite a global race to cut ghgs
- 5. Motivating change: The threat is here and now
- 6. Two, three, many venues
- 7. The economics of climate protection
- 8. Green jobs
- 9. Climate change and the global economy
- Conclusion

# Executive Summary

1. The failure of climate protection reflects the primacy of short-term competitive self-interest by nations and corporations.
2. Proposals to downplay the urgent necessity to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions for economic or political reasons only hasten climate catastrophe.
3. A real solution requires an independent global climate movement that can hold all countries and corporations accountable.
4. Such an independent movement can force countries and corporations to compete in a global race to cut greenhouse gasses, just as the global anti-nuclear movement forced countries to compete in a “peace race.”
5. While some deny or downplay the dangers of climate change, the climate protection movement must educate the public to understand that the climate threat is not just in some distant land or distant future but that it is a real and present danger here and now.
6. Climate protection can’t wait for national governments to act; it requires action by everyone from individuals to international organizations and at every level from local to global.
7. Climate protection requires using the market to “put a price on carbon,” but it must go far further than that, making the transition to a low-ghg economy as serious a social priority as war production was during World War II.
8. The effort to create “green jobs” for a transition to a low-ghg economy has stalled and is likely to revive only if there are binding requirements for ghg reductions and public policies that go beyond market incentives to make that transition a social priority.
9. Preventing climate catastrophe requires redefining the global economy from economic competition among rival nations and corporations to a “Global Green New Deal” in which the shibboleths of neoliberalism are replaced by global cooperation to rebuild the global economy on a low-ghg basis.

# Introduction

Late in 2010, the global climate coalition 1Sky asked a group of climate leaders to address the question:

“What is needed over the coming few years if we hope to achieve reductions in carbon emissions at the necessary level?”

2010 had been a rough year for those struggling to address the climate crisis. The long-anticipated Copenhagen climate change summit broke down in wrangling and discord. The US Congress abandoned efforts to pass climate legislation. A well-financed effort to deny global warming and block any restriction on fossil fuels seemed to be developing a powerful popular base.

Meanwhile, scientists reported that global temperatures in the 2010 climate year were the hottest since records began a century ago. An ice sheet four times the size of Manhattan broke off the Arctic ice pack. Los Angeles saw its hottest day in history.

Clearly the answer to 1Sky’s question is not “more of the same.” The effort to avert climate catastrophe needs to reevaluate its strategy. The Labor Network for Sustainability offers this discussion paper as a contribution to that reevaluation.

LNS is an independent network of individuals which seeks to promote an informed but freewheeling discussion in and around the labor movement of what it will really take to create a sustainable future. LNS regards sustainability as including but going beyond the environment to equally encompass social and economic sustainability as well. It views the fight against global warming as part of a broad shift in society’s principles and vision – a shift from honoring greed to honoring what’s good for the health of the planet and the people on it first and foremost.

LNS believes that climate change presents an existential threat to working people along with the rest of humanity. To avoid unimaginable catastrophe, we must reduce carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions to the level that climate science says is safe. But as a matter of justice and of political reality, we must do so in a way that provides an acceptable future for working people around the globe. The strategy

proposed in this discussion paper reflects those convictions.

The fact that the climate crisis is developing in the context of on-going global economic crisis is currently impeding progress on climate protection. The strategy proposed in this paper is designed to create a broad base for change that will provide synergistic solutions to both crises.

As global climate negotiations at Cancun fail to establish binding science-based cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, and as US President Obama backs away from even mild climate protection legislation, we hope this paper will contribute to the search for a new way forward.

## 1. The Problem

Protecting the earth's climate is in the long-term interest of all humanity. Yet efforts to cut carbon and other greenhouse gasses (ghgs) to a climate-safe level have been defeated for a quarter century in arenas ranging from the UN to the US Congress.

This is not what most climate protection advocates expected. From the mid-1980s, they had carefully constructed institutions like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] and had carefully constructed a consensus among scientists, government leaders, and UN officials around the policies defined as necessary by the IPCC. Based on the compelling arguments of the British Government's Stern report on the economics of climate change, a large swath of global business leaders signed on to climate protection policies. The "Bali roadmap" laid out the path to a binding international agreement for a phased reduction in ghgs – not as fast as everyone might have hoped, but fast enough to prevent the worst effects of global warming.

What went wrong? Why has the world's obvious long-term common interest been so hard to realize?

Governments, corporations, and other dominant institutions are not evolved to provide for either the long-term interests nor the common interests of the world's people. They have grown and prospered by pursuing the short-term interests of their citizens and stockholders (or often just a small, dominant elite among them) in competition with the

citizens and stockholders of other companies and countries. They are not designed or structured to pursue any wider human or global interest. And their time horizon is determined not by the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren but by the next election cycle or quarterly report. To their leaders, sustainability means getting through the next couple of years without loss of elections or profits.

Climate protection advocates had erroneous expectations because these institutions and leaders were willing to give lip service to climate protection, and even use its advocacy to advance their own competitive position. But when it came to actually doing something to protect the global climate, their own short-term national and corporate interests came first.

Conversely, the institutions supposed to represent global common interests, for example the UN, proved weak and dependent on governments, which ultimately retain veto power over their actions. Most governments, in turn, are subject to the veto power of private economic interests driven to pursue short term private interest above all else.

While great powers and corporations are the dominant factors in this process, many others have pursued short-term self-interest at the expense of climate protection, often to protect their own economic survival. Local communities and workers dependent on fossil fuel industries, for example, have campaigned to weaken climate protection legislation and block international climate agreements. Developing countries have fought to maintain their right to expand their use of coal. That has made it easier for the major ghg emitters to pursue a hypocritical path, talking the climate protection talk while walking the ghg walk.

## **2. A false solution: Abandon ghg reduction and call it climate protection**

One current response to the failures of climate protection has been to abandon the idea of binding international targets for ghg reduction.

Internationally this has taken the form of the “Copenhagen Accord,” an agreement cobbled together by the largest ghg-emitting countries based on voluntary targets for whatever ghg reduction each country is willing to pledge and whatever guarantees it chooses to offer. This has produced pledges that are drastically inadequate relative to what climate scientists say is necessary. And there is no evidence that the

major emitters will actually meet even those pledges. Their energy policies appear rather to be based on continued expansion of fossil fuel use for the indefinite future.

A parallel position within the US calls for research and public investment in such technologies as carbon capture and storage (CCS) for coal without putting caps on carbon emissions or even putting a price on them. Such a policy is justified as increasing energy independence and reducing air pollution. Its advocates view a transition to a low carbon economy as simply “unrealistic.” They also argue that excessive warnings about climate change and too extreme proposals for ghg reduction are politically counter-productive.

Such “realism” is itself based on an unrealistic premise: that business as usual can continue without catastrophic results. Its proponents are in tacit alliance with those who oppose climate protection altogether. And although they are often not global warming deniers themselves, their message to the public is that its threat is trivial enough that serious ghg reduction can wait for new technologies and a more propitious economic and political climate.

### **3. A real solution: An independent global movement**

While national and private interests must be brought to support climate protection, the ingredient that has been missing until recently is an independent global movement of people working together across all boundaries to secure the long-term global interest in saving the earth’s climate.

Creating such a movement may seem a hopeless task. But in the past, the failure of established institutions to solve problems has often led to the emergence of movements demanding radical change. Betrayed government promises for racial equality and nuclear disarmament, for example, helped spawn national and global civil rights, ban-the-bomb, and student movements in the 1960s.

Such a movement is in fact emerging today. It is seen in the 10/10/10 Global Work Party and Day of Climate Action, the massive actions of young people manifested by the global 350.org activities, the civil society actions at Copenhagen and Cancun, and the global network of climate protection advocacy organizations. While recognizing the many specific interests that will be affected by climate change and

climate protection, that movement is based first and foremost on solidarity with all of humanity and solidarity with future generations.

A climate protection movement can best be conceived, not as governments agreeing to climate protection measures, but as people imposing rules on states, markets, and other institutions. It is a form of social self-defense.

Governments, corporations, and other institutions are dependent on the people who cooperate or acquiesce in their power by providing labor, resources, civility, and consent. Social movements can be powerful because they embody the possibility that people may withdraw their consent, undermining the “pillars of support” that governments and institutions need to survive and realize their goals. Social movements can present a significant threat to those who hold power – and thereby provide them an incentive to change.

This threat is greatly increased when a movement is organized across national and institutional boundaries. Such a movement can put pressure on governments, corporations, and institutions from within and without simultaneously.

A movement must develop means to affect power. But to do so it must first and foremost educate and mobilize people to support its goals and become part of the movement. Its actions are first and foremost a means to do so.

The rest of this discussion paper addresses strategic questions faced by this movement.

#### **4. How an independent movement can incite a global race to cut ghgs**

A core strategic objective for climate protection should be to foment a competition among countries and corporations to radically reduce their ghg emissions.

Until recently, climate protection advocates have rejoiced in their apparently close connection with national governments and their apparent support from corporations. But that closeness comes with costs.

The potential power of such a movement lies primarily in the fact that it represents the common interests of all the world's people in survival and sustainability. That requires jealously guarding global unity and independence from particular governments, businesses, and industries. Otherwise the movement will appear to be little more than a shill for one or another country or special interest.

The movement against nuclear weapons and testing provides a significant parallel. That process is described at length in the magisterial three-volume history *The Struggle Against the Bomb* by Lawrence Wittner. According to Wittner,

Most government officials – and particularly those of the major powers – had no intention of adopting nuclear arms control and disarmament policies. Instead, they grudgingly accepted such policies thanks to the emergence of popular pressure. . . . Confronted by a vast wave of popular resistance, they concluded, reluctantly, that compromise had become the price of political survival. Consequently they began to adapt their rhetoric and policies to the movement's program.

The "ban the bomb" movement demanded more of cold war rivals than lip service or courtship. It demanded -- from both sides -- unilateral initiatives for peace, an end to nuclear testing, a halt to the arms buildup, and binding disarmament agreements. As Wittner massively documents, the international movement and world public opinion forced rival nations and blocs to accept the nuclear test ban treaty, détente, arms control, and the unacceptability of using nuclear weapons.

Indeed, the anti-nuclear movement created a bidding war among the the world's leading powers. For example, as antinuclear demonstrations swelled in America and Europe in the early 1980s, arch-Cold Warrior President Ronald Reagan told his astonished secretary of state, "If things get hotter and hotter and arms control remains an issue, maybe I should go see [Soviet leader] Andropov and propose eliminating all nuclear weapons." The US thereupon agreed to forego deployment of medium-range missiles in Western Europe if Russia would remove its medium-range missiles from Eastern Europe. When Gorbachev came to power he met with peace movement leaders and unexpectedly agreed to support the peace movement's proposal for a nuclear freeze. The US thereupon cut back on its proposed MX missiles from 200 to 50; abandoned plans to deploy the neutron bomb in Western Europe; and accepted the limits of the unratified SALT II arms control treaty.

Ultimately the superpowers negotiated the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which resulted in the removal of about 80 percent of all existing strategic weapons. A revised version of the treaty remained in effect until 2009 and continues to be observed today. While these results are not fully adequate to protect the world from nuclear holocaust, they illustrate the dynamics that an independent global movement can use to force governments to move toward the long-term common interests of humanity.

While some peace movements were primarily aligned with East or West, it was the existence of a nonaligned peace movement that provided the crucial ingredient for the “peace race.” The nonaligned movement could call the shots as it saw them, criticizing or praising each country on the basis of its actual performance. That created, in effect, a bidding war over who would do the most for peace.

The global movement for climate protection can foment the same dynamic. But to do so it must maintain its independence. In the aftermath of Copenhagen many countries tried to win international support for their interpretation of events and what should be done. The US promoted its Copenhagen Accord; Bolivia organized a world conference to promote a third-world alternative; a group of Chinese intellectuals circulated a letter asking for support of China’s position against that of the US.

While each of these positions included some valid points, the fact is that no country is taking the concrete steps necessary to halt global warming. An independent movement must put pressure on all of them. And it must successfully persuade people that it is not in any country’s pocket, but that it represents the long-term interest of all.

## **5. Motivating change: The threat is here and now**

Climate change is often portrayed as something that primarily affects Pacific islands or the arctic, and that any significant effect on major countries is decades or even a century away. The central reason for climate movement power, however is the fact that climate change poses an existential threat to every individual, family, group, and institution – and that threat is here and now. Not in distant lands. Not in the distant future. Climate protection is the necessary response to a real and present danger. The purpose of portraying this is not to put people in a panic, but to give them a realistic understanding of what they are up against.

This approach is represented in the first chapter of Bill McKibben's *Eaarth*. The Labor Network for Sustainability has adopted a similar approach in such pieces as "Climate Change in California: The Future Has Arrived," "Coming Now to a Job Near You!," and "We're Number One – In Financial Damage from Climate Change."

It is often said that "prophesying doom" will only lead to despair and passivity. That is indeed a danger, so it must be combined with strategies and actions that can offer hope for genuine solutions. That is just what the new climate movement has begun to do.

## 6. Two, three, many venues

In 2009, many climate groups overcame a strategic crisis in the climate movement by shifting the frame of the climate protection discussion. Instead of endlessly debating hypothetical carbon reduction targets for two or four decades from now, they honed in on the urgent necessity to reduce the levels of carbon already in the atmosphere to those scientists say are safe - currently estimated at 350 parts per million (ppm). That changed the game in the global climate debate.

This shift allowed a strategy oriented to the goal to be realized, rather than around the policy options for reaching it, which will be different in different venues and which must evolve over time. It also defines every reduction in ghg emissions as a contribution to fighting climate change.

While policy debates can be important, it is also important that the movement not get locked into contests among cap-and-trade, cap-and-dividend, carbon tax, and other means to the goal of climate protection. Rather, it should be holding all individuals, institutions, and governments accountable for making actual reductions in ghgs.

Nor should the movement be divided over local, regional, national, and global arenas. Given the scope and urgency of climate protection, the movement needs to pursue every level, every strategy, and every venue. Change is required in every sphere.

We should not shy away from the fact that ghg reduction requires changes in individual lifestyles, and that all of us as individuals have a responsibility to reduce the contribution we personally make to global warming. We also should recognize that our social and cultural practices contribute to climate destruction, and that we must work together

to change them. But we must also point out that most of the changes necessary cannot be made by individuals or by voluntary cultural change; they require changing governments, corporations, markets, and international relations. These changes are necessary at local, national, and global levels.

Such a perspective allows the movement to keep moving forward even when it is stymied in one arena.

## 7. The economics of climate protection

The major proposed means for ghg reduction has been to “put a price on carbon,” either through a cap-and-trade system or such variants as a cap-and-dividend system or a carbon tax. Such market-based strategies are necessary but not sufficient.

According to the British government's Stern report, the greatest market failure of all history is the destruction of the planet by greenhouse gases. While current "cap and trade" programs attempt to create a market solution to this problem by creating a market to buy and sell pollution permits, we cannot wait for the market to fix the market.

We must reconstruct society on a low ghg basis regardless of whether or not it is profitable to do so. We need to create a rapidly growing "green" sector in which production is based on social necessity - specifically, for climate protection - not just for profit.

This doesn't necessarily mean a classic “command economy.” Markets and systems of decentralized cooperatives can be part of the mix. It's not an ideological question: We can use price mechanisms as a technical device for efficient allocation once basic social priorities have been set. But the price mechanisms must not override the basic social decision to reconstruct society on a low-carbon emission basis. Where the market won't implement that transformation, public planning, regulation, and investment must do so.

Wartime mobilization provides an analogy. We don't expect an army to make a profit. It has other responsibilities and requires other means of support. During World War II, for example, public policy mandated the production that was necessary: tanks and airplanes. Money, factories, labor, and other resources were redirected to that purpose. Tens of millions of unemployed and underemployed workers were trained and

put to work producing what the war effort required. (The campaign for such a program was first popularized by UAW president Walter Reuther's pamphlet *500 planes a day: A program for the utilization of the automobile industry for mass production of defense planes.*)

At the same time, public policy forbade much production that was unnecessary; as a popular song about wartime mobilization put it, "put those plans for pleasure cars away." Today's equivalent would be mandated annual reductions in carbon-emitting production and consumption, combined with employment of all available people and resources for economic transformation.

The recent success of the Chinese economy, and specifically its spectacular success in expanding green industries, is similarly based on establishing social priorities, expanding public investment and training, and shutting down industries that pollute or waste resources needed to combat pollution.

## 8. Green jobs

Less than a decade ago, a few people from the environmental and labor movements began proposing to use the transition to a low-carbon economy as a way simultaneously to protect the earth's climate and create desperately needed new jobs. The idea of "green jobs" provided a brilliant breakthrough in American politics. It built a coalition among often-conflicting groups, helped win Obama the presidency, and provided a hopeful prospect for addressing both the economic and the climate crises.

Unfortunately, the green jobs movement has been fiercely and often successfully resisted by a combination of fossil fuel interests and tea-party style ideological deniers of climate change.

This situation requires rethinking on the part of both labor and environmental movements.

On the environmentalist side, a common view is that climate protection will create so many green jobs that nobody needs to worry about those few workers who may lose their jobs to climate policies. This has led to a fatal alienation of working class folks from the green-jobs-climate-protection bandwagon. They know that, however many green jobs are created, those who now have decent jobs in the carbon-dependent

sector are likely to lose theirs -- and may never get a decent job again in their lives.

On the labor side, a common view is that we can go ahead and create millions of new jobs in the green energy economy while continuing to expand our use of coal and postponing targets for carbon emissions reduction. While it is understandable that unions want all the jobs they can get, such an approach undercuts the necessity for transformation that is required to drive the shift to a green energy economy in the first place.

On both sides, there has been a view that a "green energy policy" can win wide support without addressing the basic need to fix global warming. National energy independence, protection of local environments from pollution, and lower energy prices have been seen as sufficient motivation for transforming energy systems.

This strategy has now definitively failed -- a fact illustrated by the collapse of climate protection legislation in Congress and the US abandonment of the "Bali roadmap" at Copenhagen. The sad reality is that there will be no massive expansion of green jobs without taking the climate threat seriously. Without binding targets and means of enforcing them, green jobs will remain just a vain wish rather than a reality creating full employment and a sustainable planet.

Further, creating green jobs is not enough to persuade workers that climate protection will not threaten their jobs. Workers feel threatened — often with good reason — by the large changes necessary to protect the climate from global warming. Such fears are intensified by today's soaring unemployment. Environmentalists have often addressed this challenge by pointing out that a transition to green energy would create far more jobs than it would eliminate. While that may be true, it entirely misses the point. The fact that some people get new jobs provides little solace for the individuals and communities who have lost theirs.

Therefore, along with green jobs climate protection must provide a "just transition" that provides for those workers and communities who are adversely affected by climate protection policies. That will require individual transition assistance, such as an equivalent for displaced workers of the GI Bill of Rights. It will also require community redevelopment programs and regional development initiatives on the scale of the New Deal's TVA reconstruct local and regional energy economies.

Both the green transition and the just transition require us to challenge the idea that the economic crisis and the climate crisis can be solved simply by "unleashing the market." Both crises reflect the effects of markets run wild, without the controls necessary to make them work for human purposes. A serious transition to a low-carbon economy, and the creation of a large new sector of green jobs to make that transition, will require major public investment and much more public planning.

## 9. Climate change and the global economy

The climate crisis is escalating in the context of the deepest global economic crisis in eighty years. This crisis reflects the failure of globalization and neoliberalism and will likely over time produce a search for alternatives. The climate movement should take advantage of this context to pursue solutions that go beyond prevailing economic assumptions.

The defeat of climate protection has resulted in large part from a view of the world as a geopolitical and economic competition among rival nations and corporations. Copenhagen foundered in good part on how the economic costs and benefits of climate protection would be borne by different countries and their economic institutions.

In the face of the breakdown of international climate cooperation, the more highly planned and regulated economy of China is allocating massive public resources to developing a "green energy economy" and, in the context of global competition, is literally wiping out the solar and wind power industries in the US. This is being met by appeals by US labor and others to punish the Chinese under WTO rules for encouraging climate protection. Why not instead compete with the Chinese to see who can provide the most effective subsidies for the climate protection?

What is needed is neither escalating trade wars nor the free-trade utopia of neoliberalism. Instead, we need to implement a strategy of mutually managed trade that encourages all countries to develop their climate protection industries and technologies as rapidly as possible, while allowing the benefits to be shared in a way that protects both developing countries and workers in developed countries -- not to mention the planet as a whole.

A framework for such an approach has often been characterized as a

“Global Green New Deal.” The International Trade Union Confederation [ITUC], which represents 176 million workers in 151 countries, has worked with the UN to develop a strategy for utilizing the current crisis to reconstruct a greener and more just global economy.

This approach has been endorsed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who has called for “an investment that fights climate change, creates millions of green jobs and spurs green growth.” He says that what the world needs, in short, is a “Green New Deal.”

In the depths of the Great Depression, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal – a set of government programs to provide employment and social security, reform tax policies and business practices, stimulate the economy, and restore a devastated national environment. It included not only the building of homes, hospitals, school, roads, dams, electrical grids, but massive programs in forest conservation, land preservation, and environmentally-protective agricultural policies. The New Deal put millions of people to work and created a new policy framework for America democracy.

The United Nation Environment Program (UNEP) and the ITUC developed the Green Economy Initiative, which advocates “mobilizing and re-focusing the global economy towards investments in clean technologies and ‘natural’ infrastructure such as forests and soils.” According to UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner, the financial, fuel, and food crises result in part from “speculation and a failure of governments to intelligently manage and focus markets.” Enormous economic, social and environmental benefits are likely to arise from “combating climate change and re-investing in natural infrastructures – benefits ranging from new green jobs in clean tech and clean energy businesses up to ones in sustainable agriculture and conservation-based enterprises.”

According to UNEP, the objectives of a “Global Green New Deal” should be to create jobs and restore the financial system and global economy to health; to put the post-crisis economy on a sustainable path that deals with ecological scarcity and climate instability; and to put an end extreme poverty. It spells out investments and policy reforms to achieve these goals.

The world labor movement emphasizes that addressing both the problem of climate change and the problem of economic decline require government leadership and cooperation among governments. As the ITUC’s statement to the Copenhagen climate conference put it,

Economic transformation can not be left to the “invisible hand” of the market. Government-driven investments, innovation and skills development, social protection and consultation with social partners (unions and employers) are essential if we want to make change happen.

As the Stern Review reminds us, climate change represents the biggest market failure in history. We cannot trust the same failed market mechanisms to successfully steer out of this crisis. The problem has to be solved through regulation, democratically-decided and implemented public policies and most importantly political leadership.

Until both labor and climate protection movements start to take on the shibboleths of neoliberalism, we face more of the same only worse.

## Conclusion

The failure of the Cancun talks to cut greenhouse gasses, and the abandonment of climate protection legislation in the US, indicate that a new course for climate protection is necessary. It requires a global climate movement that is independent of nations and corporations and therefore able to make them compete in a global race to cut carbon and other greenhouse gasses. It requires the construction of a global public that understands the threat of climate catastrophe and is devoted to imposing solutions on reluctant governments and other institutions at every level from local to global. It requires a “just transition” that ensures that workers and communities around the world are beneficiaries rather than victims of climate protection. And all these conditions require the transcendence of neoliberalism by a new global economic regime that makes human sustainability a higher priority than the short-term interests of any country or corporation.