

The New AFL-CIO Stand on Climate Change:

What Does It Mean for Labor and for the Climate?

At its Quadrennial Convention in late October, the AFL-CIO unanimously adopted a resolution on “Climate Change, Energy, and Union Jobs.”

[<https://aflcio.org/resolutions/resolution-55-climate-change-energy-and-union-jobs>] The resolution says that the fastest and most equitable way to address climate change is for “labor to be at the center of creating solutions that reduce emissions while investing in our communities, maintaining and creating high-wage union jobs, and reducing poverty.”

If acted on, the resolution will bring about significant changes in organized labor and will bring American trade unions into far closer alignment with allies in the climate protection movement.

The resolution starts with the facts of global warming. It acknowledges “the overwhelming scientific consensus” that climate warming is “due to human activities” and that higher global temperatures will trigger “irreversible changes in our climate,” causing “a rise in sea levels and storm surges, an increase in droughts and extreme weather events, a substantial threat of increased extinctions, decreased food security in some regions, and an increase in heat-induced health problems.”

The resolution turns next to the social justice dimensions of climate change. “Workers, communities of color and low-income Americans suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation and climate change” through “polluted air, water and land,” and from “drought and extreme weather events.” It cites Pope Francis and other religious leaders on the “moral imperative to address both climate change and poverty.”

The resolution notes that tens of thousands of union members work in industries that rely on fossil fuels or live in regions where fossil fuels are “the primary economic driver in their communities.” Like all workers, they have a right to “a strong, viable economic future” including good jobs at union wages and benefits. It cites the Paris Agreement on “the imperative of a just transition” of the workforce and “decent work and quality jobs” when addressing climate change. It resolves to fight politically and legislatively “to secure and maintain employment, pensions and health care” for workers affected by changes in the energy market.

Some limitations

The AFL-CIO has never endorsed science-based targets and timetables for greenhouse gas reduction. This resolution still fails to do so.

The AFL-CIO has also long endorsed an “all the above” energy policy which does not advocate for the transition to fossil-free energy at all, let alone on a timetable necessary to protect against catastrophic climate change. This resolution endorses renewable energy and energy efficiency, but also carbon capture and storage and nuclear power. It does not call for even a reduction in the burning of fossil fuel.

The resolution’s approach to creating climate jobs is somewhat puzzling. One might expect a labor resolution on climate to call for a program to put millions of Americans to work building a climate-safe economy. It does list several moves it says would create “millions of good jobs.” One is “raising labor standards and organizing in the energy efficiency and renewable energy sectors,” which often fail to provide “family-supporting employment.” Labor standards and unionization would surely improve the quality of “green jobs,” though creating millions of jobs would also require programs to create the jobs.

Another proposal to create millions of good jobs is “domestic production” of advanced energy systems and “decreasing reliance on imported clean-energy goods.” It is not clear, however, whether this should be done by policies that attempt to keep the products of other countries out or by encouraging the development of domestic industries.

The third proposal to create millions of good jobs is recognizing that “the battle to combat climate change cannot be waged on a project-by-project basis.” It is a little unclear how this would create “millions of good jobs.” Perhaps it is added not as ammunition for climate protection but as a justification for continuing the AFL-CIO’s support for climate-destroying infrastructure projects like the KXL and Dakota Access pipelines. This resolution laudably states that Congress should enact “comprehensive energy and climate legislation” that creates good jobs and addresses the threat of climate change. But it is obvious that the present Congress will not do so. It is for that very reason that genuine advocates of climate protection must start protecting the climate now without waiting for legislation.

The resolution praises the Paris agreement. But its specific praise of the agreement for “respecting national sovereignty and self-determination” appears to endorse the greatest weakness of the Paris agreement – that it does not actually commit any nation to any actual cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. To its credit, it also praises the agreement for committing wealthy nations to assist less-developed ones in reducing emissions and adapting to climate change.

According to insiders, the decision by the leadership of the AFL-CIO to propose this resolution may well have resulted in part from the fact that a number of unions and state labor councils submitted far stronger climate resolutions, and that rank-and-file groups organized to support them. Overall, this resolution represents a powerful statement of labor’s stake in protecting the climate. However, it retains many of the assumptions and approaches that have often put unions at loggerheads with concrete climate protection efforts. Whether it actually represents a new beginning or just old wine in new bottles

will largely depend on the growing sector of the labor movement that is committed to putting labor “at the center of creating solutions that reduce emissions while investing in our communities, maintaining and creating high-wage union jobs, and reducing poverty.”