

How to Talk to Skeptical Union Members About Climate Change and Climate Justice

In the wake of multiple deadly hurricanes, made more destructive by warming ocean waters as a result of climate change, it would seem to be a great time to raise awareness about this issue. But with the Trump Administration doing everything it can to deny science and muzzle critics, it can still be a challenge. So how do we, in age of Trump, talk about climate change and climate justice with our members? Here are a few key things to keep in mind:

***Beware of cherry picking:** Many arguments are based on individual examples taken out of the larger context. For example, a short term increase in sea ice in one year doesn't negate the fact that the vast majority of sea ice is decreasing. Remind folks that scientists look not at one example but at years of data.

***Greenhouse gases produced by pollution from cars and factories are the key:** Natural factors change temperatures, but the influence of natural forces is dwarfed by the impact of greenhouse gases from fossil fuels. So it really is the way we live now that is the problem.

***Human activity is responsible for the surge in carbon dioxide and subsequent warming:** In 1880, shortly after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide was at 291 parts per million. Today it is at 402 parts per million. You can't blame warming on the sun either. Scientists have observed that solar activity has actually decreased since 1950, and if it were not for human activity, we would be in a global cooling period. Thus, this is not a normal part of nature. If we continue at this rate, we'll kill the planet.

***The debate over climate change is political not scientific:** 99% of scientists share the view that climate change is happening now and that human activity is to blame. The folks who are denying it are either fossil fuel interests like Exxon, whose internal records show they knew that climate change was happening decades ago, or politicians in league with those interests.

***We don't have hundreds of years to figure this out:** Quite recently, scientists at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography reported that there is a small chance that we could see catastrophic or even an existential threat from climate change by 2050. By 2070 the odds go up to 20 to 30 percent. Even if we get lucky and things don't get that bad, many other merely bad environmental, social and economic consequences will surely occur. Why take the risk at all?

***Climate change has the potential to change the game in a transformative way:** When we finally realize that climate change needs to be addressed, the transformation to a green economy has the potential to create a huge number of good new jobs. We no longer need to choose between addressing climate change and economic growth. Addressing climate change will create a new industry and new opportunities. If unions make smart alliances with environmental partners, we can forge a better society that addresses both the threat of climate change and the crisis of deepening economic inequality. It's just smart for unions to be at the table rather than on the table.

Final advice: Be patient as recent polling shows that only 13% of Americans are aware of the scientific consensus.

Sources: "What Should You Say to a Climate Change Skeptic?" *LA Times* 8/18/17 and "Scripps Says Climate Change May Represent 'Existential' Threat to Humanity." *San Diego Union-Tribune* 9/14/17