

## **Why Should Labor Care about the Environment and Climate Change?: An Introduction**

“Let’s be clear, climate change is the most important issue facing all of us for the rest of our lives,” John Harity, President of the Connecticut State Council of Machinists

### **We are facing a historic environmental crisis that threatens our present and future survival.**

*Think Progress* pithily summarized the conclusions of last year’s United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, noting that:

The world’s top scientists and governments have issued their bluntest plea yet to the world: Slash carbon pollution now (at a very low cost) or risk “severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems.” Scientists have “high confidence” these devastating impacts occur “even with adaptation” — if we keep doing little or nothing.

A short list of the many catastrophic effects of unchecked climate change includes severe drought, increased disease, threatened food systems due to dust bowl like conditions, ocean acidification, increased global conflict over resources, economic collapse, and mass extinction. In short, the overwhelming majority of serious scientists as well as governmental agencies such as NASA and even the U.S. Defense Department are warning of a grim future if we fail to address this issue.

This has not gone without notice in the world of labor either. As some of our brothers and sisters in Trade Unions for Energy Democracy in Australia put it:

We are facing an energy and climate emergency that amounts to a planetary crisis. The growing levels of fossil based energy is stretching planetary limits by raising greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution to alarming levels. This is affecting the health and quality of life of millions.

The power of fossil fuel corporations has made it practically impossible to protect the health and safety of workers and communities, and union representation is under attack across the globe. Despite more energy being generated every year, energy poverty remains a serious global issue — 1.6 billion people, or 20% of the world’s population, do not have regular access to electricity.

It has become increasingly clear that the transition to an equitable, sustainable energy system can only occur if there is decisive shift in power towards workers, communities and the public.

And this challenge is a big one, but one that can unite the public and private sector as well as labor, environmental, and community activists. When speaking to the Canadian Autoworkers, author Naomi Klein put it this way, “Our current economic model is not only waging war on workers, on communities, on public services and social safety nets. It’s waging war on the life support systems of the planet itself. The conditions for life on earth.” So we need a dramatic transition to green energy and the climate crisis creates the possibility for new alliances and historic opportunities to change the game and create a more environmentally sustainable and

economically just world.

**Labor Should Lead the Transition to a just Green Economy and Green Union Jobs because the corporate world won't.** As Bruce Hamilton Vice President of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) put it at the Lima Climate talks, “Labor should not just be at the table, labor should be planning the transition. We also believe that labor has a responsibility to really lead the transition to a low-carbon, to really a no-carbon economy, because if we don't do that, then some kind of a transition is going to be made by big business, and it is going to be very detrimental to working people and poor people. Far, far far more jobs are available in fighting against climate change than there ever could possibly be in expanding dirty fuel. As a matter of fact, the biggest job killer really is inaction on climate change.”

Hence, to quote a sign from the People's Climate March in New York City last fall, we are confronted with, “Climate/Jobs. Two Crises: One Solution.” And some folks are dreaming big about what could happen. Jeremy Brecher, Ron Blackwell, and Joe Uehlein in “If Not Now, When? A Labor Movement Plan to Address Climate Change” envision:

A strategy designed to provide full employment and rising living standards by putting millions of people to work on the transition to a climate-safe economy could transform the politics of climate by shattering the “jobs versus the environment” frame. And it could provide a common platform around which climate protection advocates at every level of the labor movement could rally . . .

Organized labor played a significant role in World War II mobilization. Tripartite boards of government, business, and labor representatives gave unions a formal role in decision making, albeit one that often remained subordinate to corporate power. If organized labor stands aloof from the climate protection movement, it is unlikely to have such a role in future government-led climate protection institutions. If labor takes a lead in building public support for a climate protection plan, it is far more likely to have a voice in ensuring that climate policies are worker-friendly

Right now, much of organized labor is painting a portrait of itself as an obstacle to climate protection. By advancing a plan that protects the environment by reducing GHG emissions while putting Americans back to work, raising wages, and reducing economic inequality, labor can lead the struggle for a more just and sustainable economy and put itself back on the right side of history.

In sum, what the climate crisis offers us is a chance to address both the issues of historic economic inequality and looming environmental catastrophe in a way that will allow us to create a new world out of the ashes of the old.

## **The San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council Environmental Caucus**

The San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council Environmental Caucus is one of the first of its kind in California and the nation at large. Thus it can serve as a model for others elsewhere by educating our members about the pressing environmental issues of the day, building strong community-labor alliances, serving as a policy body inside the Labor Council, and promoting progressive labor/environmental legislation.

Union leaders and their locals can be a part of this exciting new development in San Diego by:

- 1) **Learning:** Educating yourself and your members on the issues—have someone from the caucus come and give a presentation or use our materials to do it yourself.
- 2) **Greening your local:** Research how your union office can be made more sustainable and serve as an example in the community by greening your union.
- 3) **Greening your workplace:** Look for opportunities to work with employers to promote sustainable workplaces.
- 4) **Supporting Environmental Caucus activities:** Send your members to Environmental Caucus meetings and help promote EC actions and solidarity work with our community partners.
- 5) **Greening your politics:** Look for ways to link labor and environmental issues in all of your work. Don't just make sure that candidates support labor issues, look for them to step up on the environment as well. Stop looking at the environmental movement as a competing interest group and start seeing it as an ally.