



Photo courtesy of the Lincoln Journal Star

Supporters of the Keystone XL pipeline arrive at Lincoln, Nebraska's Pershing Center on September 27, 2011 for a public meeting with U.S. State Department officials.

Stormy Weather: Climate Change and a Divided Labor Movement

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The onset of climate change represents an existential threat unlike anything our society, or even our species, has faced. It also represents a transformational opportunity if we get busy now with a serious program to arrest advancing global warming. Organized labor, like every other segment of American society, is having a tough time coming to terms with climate change, and the witches' brew of environmental and other issues that interact with it. But helping take the lead in a proactive response to climate change may provide labor's greatest opportunity to reconstruct our economy, providing thereby the context to rebuild the labor movement. Can organized labor rise to the challenge?

Helping take the lead in a proactive response to climate change may provide labor's greatest opportunity to reconstruct our economy and rebuild the labor movement.

The greenhouse gasses humanity has already put in the atmosphere will raise global temperatures from preindustrial levels by 2°C (almost 4°F, and the level the nations of the world agreed to avoid) even if we stop putting carbon in the atmosphere today. After a quarter century of delay, we will have to cut greenhouse gas emissions radically and rapidly to prevent 4°C (7°F) warming, which would almost certainly

lead to global ecosystem collapse. This year's floods, fires, storms, and other extreme weather episodes provide an urgent reminder.

While organized labor can be slow to change, it does change. A movement that once pursued racial exclusion became a bastion of ethnic diversity; a movement that once supported discrimination against immigrants became a beacon for immigrant rights; a movement that never met a war it did not like, even Vietnam, became an opponent of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Organized labor is also changing its approach to global warming. But that change—like these previous ones—involves tension and sometimes conflict.

The AFL-CIO, in contrast to most of the world's labor movements, opposed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol agreeing to cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. In 2006, it created an Energy Task Force whose statement "Jobs and Energy for the 21st Century"¹ acknowledged the scientific evidence that fossil fuels are contributing to global warming, but opposed "extreme measures" that would "undermine economic growth," "harm particular sectors," or place the United States "at a disadvantage to other nations." It held that any program for tradable emission permits (e.g., cap-and-trade) should initially seek only to "gradually slow the growth in greenhouse gas emissions"—in other words,

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allow emissions to continue to grow. Measures to actually reduce fossil fuel use should wait until nuclear, clean coal, and other alternatives have assured abundant energy. This approach guided the AFL-CIO's lobbying around climate protection legislation.

Like the rest of American society, organized labor's approach to climate change has continued to evolve. For example, when he was head of the United Mine Workers, Richard Trumka opposed the Kyoto Protocol and advocated expanded use of coal and other fossil fuels. But in his current role as president of the AFL-CIO, Trumka recently said, "Scientists tell us we are headed ever more swiftly toward irreversible climate change—with catastrophic consequences for human civilization." Far from being a threat only in a distant future, "Climate change is happening now." And that demands action: "The carbon emissions from that coal, and from oil and natural gas, and agriculture and so much other human activity—causes global warming, and we have to act to cut those emissions, and act now."²

However, the AFL-CIO still has not endorsed even the minimal targets for carbon reduction proposed by the world's leading body of climate scientists, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), let alone the reduction of carbon in the atmosphere to 350 parts per million that James Hansen, head of the NASA Goddard Institute and America's leading climate scientist, and many other experts say is necessary to prevent those "catastrophic consequences for human civilization."

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Meanwhile, organized labor has become an enthusiastic proponent of "green jobs." The AFL-CIO established a Center for Green Jobs to promote green jobs, establish appropriate job standards, and help train workers to fill them. The Steelworkers cofounded the Blue-Green Alliance (BGA) with the Sierra Club to expand the "clean economy." Many unions established green jobs programs. Labor and environmental

groups helped make green jobs a key part of Obama's 2008 campaign message. But by and large, unions also continue to support jobs that accelerate climate catastrophe.

In part, this reflects underlying structural problems in organized labor that make it difficult to confront broad social issues like global warming. On the one hand, U.S. unions represent particular groups of workers. On the other hand, the AFL-CIO has, in principle, represented the interests of workers as a whole. However, since the days of Samuel Gompers' "craft autonomy," the interests of individual unions have often trumped those of workers as a whole. By tradition, within the AFL-CIO, the unions perceived as most impacted by an issue call the shots. As a leader of the Laborers' union (LIUNA) put it, "If there's legislation or a project that's good for another union, and my members don't have equity in the work, I'm going to be supportive or I'm going to say nothing."³ Following the same principle, the AFL-CIO's energy task force is composed primarily of the mineworkers, industrial unions, and construction trades. The existential interest of all workers in halting climate change, and the interest of all the unions that stand to gain from effective climate protection, play only a marginal role.

The Keystone XL (KXL) Pipeline

These contradictions came to the surface in September 2010 when TransCanada, a Canadian pipeline company, signed a project labor agreement with the Teamsters, Plumbers, Operating Engineers, and Laborers for work on the KXL pipeline, which would carry oil produced from tar sands in Alberta, Canada, nearly 2,000 miles to Nederland, Texas. The union presidents issued a statement saying that the project would "pave a path to better days and raise the standard of living for working men and women in the construction, manufacturing, and transportation industries." It would allow American workers to "get back to the task of strengthening their families and the communities they live in."⁴

The KXL issue did not come to a head, however, until June 2011, when leading

environmentalist Bill McKibben, founder of the global grassroots climate protection organization 350.org, and a group of other movement leaders called for a month of unprecedented civil disobedience actions against the pipeline.⁵ McKibben pointed out that burning the recoverable oil in the Alberta tar sands by itself would raise the carbon level in the atmosphere by 200 parts per million (ppm). It was not hard to figure out that this would increase the 390 ppm carbon in the atmosphere today by more than half. Indeed, it would increase the gap between the current level and the safe level of 350 ppm five-fold. He called the pipeline “a fifteen hundred mile fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the planet.” He quoted Hansen, saying that tar sands “must be left in the ground.” Indeed, “if the tar sands are thrown into the mix it is essentially game over” for a viable planet.

The media rushed to portray the pipeline as a typical case of “jobs versus the environment” pitting the labor movement against the environmental movement; NPR proclaimed, “Pipeline Decision Pits Jobs against Environment.”⁶ However, efforts began immediately to develop labor opposition to the pipeline. A series of articles by the Labor Network for Sustainability questioned whether the KXL was really in labor’s interest. A widely publicized study by the Cornell Global Labor Institute challenged the industry’s job claims.⁷

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) issued a joint statement saying, “We need jobs, but not ones based on increasing our reliance on Tar Sands Oil.” The statement called for major “New Deal” type public investments in infrastructure modernization and repair, energy conservation, and climate protection as a means of “putting people to work and laying the foundations of a green and sustainable economic future for the United States.”⁸ Terry O’Sullivan, president of the Laborers, cracked back: “It’s time for ATU and TWU to come out from under the skirts of delusional environmental groups which stand in the way of creating good, much-needed American jobs.”⁹ LIUNA threatened to end support for legislation that benefits transit workers.

With its member unions divided, the AFL-CIO decided not to take a position on the pipeline. The BGA also took no position, even though more of its members opposed than supported the pipeline. (Many took no position.) Six unions and several environmental groups issued a statement that was neutral on the pipeline but supported President Obama’s decision not to give it an accelerated permit. O’Sullivan responded, “We’re repulsed by some of our supposed brothers and sisters lining up with job killers like the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council to destroy the lives of working men and women.”¹⁰ LIUNA withdrew from the BGA, testified for some of the most antilabor members of Congress, and even participated in events funded by the Koch brothers. Jack Gerard, president of the American Petroleum Institute, gleefully proclaimed, “We will stand shoulder to shoulder with labor unions that have backed the pipeline, including the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO’s Building and Construction Trades Department.”¹¹

While the KXL issue illustrated tensions and conflicts both within organized labor and between labor and environmental movements, it opened up a conversation that needs to take place. If union support for KXL had not been challenged, the labor movement would simply have ignored the climate and environmental issues raised by the tar sands and the pipeline. Without the conflict, it is doubtful that the six unions would have supported Obama’s permit decision or engaged with the issue in any other way. Such tensions are inescapable if the necessary change is to come. But those tensions can only be creative if labor and environmental groups focus on building relationships that keep tensions within limits and minimize lasting damage. Even more important, those tensions can lead to the recognition that labor and environmentalists must defuse “jobs versus the environment” with a jobs strategy based on protecting the environment. Ultimately, it is through honest differences of opinion that the labor movement can arrive at sound conclusions and correct judgments.

Job Alternatives on the Ground

The growing difficulty of accessing conventional oil and gas is leading to efforts to utilize energy that is increasingly harmful to extract, transport, and use, such as tar sands oil, fracked natural gas, coal from mountaintop removal and ecologically fragile locations, oil from deepwater drilling, inappropriate biomass, and nuclear power. As with the tar sands pipeline, so in each of these cases proponents will dangle the promise of jobs, unions will be tempted to play a supporting role, and the public will be told that the issue is “jobs versus the environment.” Those who oppose such extreme energy will similarly be branded “job killers.”

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While advocates of renewable energy alternatives rightly point out that solar, wind, and energy conservation create far more jobs than fossil fuel and nuclear alternatives, that means little to workers whose current livelihoods or opportunities for a decent job are threatened by environmental campaigns. While critics can validly point out that claims about numbers of jobs to be created by KXL and similar projects are often wildly inflated, that is largely irrelevant to desperate workers for whom any job is better than no job. And while critics can often show that most of the jobs created are temporary, the same can be said of many jobs in today’s economy, including most union construction jobs. Even some union officials who strongly supported climate protection legislation simultaneously argued heatedly for the KXL pipeline as a source of immediate jobs for their desperate members.

The solution for advocates of renewable energy in both the environmental and the labor movements is to develop our own job programs to provide workers and communities a better

alternative than destroying everyone’s future through the extraction and use of extreme energy. How is that possible? Some interesting examples come from recent campaigns to close coal-fired power plants, which we have analyzed in *Jobs beyond Coal*.¹² In Centralia, Washington, for example, local environmentalists, religious leaders, and the Sierra Club campaigned to transition a coal-fired TransAlta power plant to cleaner energy. At first, they met opposition from the union that represented workers at the plant. But in extended discussion with the union, the environmental coalition discovered that its real concern was not to prolong coal burning per se, but to protect the jobs of workers in the plant and provide an economic future for nearby communities. Thereupon, wrote journalist Mark Hertsgaard, the environmental coalition “insisted that the plant’s workforce be retained throughout its closure and cleanup; that workers be trained in the technologies that would replace coal, especially energy efficiency, and that the company, not the taxpayers, subsidize the transition.”¹³ The result was an agreement between environmentalists, TransAlta, and the state of Washington that meant 40 percent of the plant’s 250 employees will reach retirement age before the closing, and the rest will have at least eight years in their current jobs. The company also agreed to provide \$30 million to a community investment fund and \$25 million for an energy-technology transition fund.¹⁴ The union enthusiastically supported the deal.

While there is no single model for such work, there are numerous cases where unions and environmentalists have cooperated to get companies to transition beyond coal in ways that are acceptable to both.¹⁵ Such on-the-ground cooperation around particular facilities—existing and proposed—can provide an alternative for protecting worker interests wherever the threat of an extreme energy project raises its head. Similar responses could be developed wherever extreme energy programs offer jobs destroying our future. But that will require commitment and proactive response, preferably from labor and environmental movements working in tandem.

Protecting Workers by Protecting the Climate

In their letter advocating the KXL permit, trade union leaders acknowledged the criticism that “further development of Canada’s oil sands puts in jeopardy U.S. efforts aimed at capping carbon emissions and greenhouse gasses.” They answered, “Comprehensive energy and environmental policy should strive to address climate concerns while simultaneously ensuring adequate supplies of reliable energy and promoting energy independence and national security.”¹⁶ That expresses the official energy and climate policy of the American labor movement. It is similar to the “all of the above” energy policy advocated by President Obama.

Such a “balanced policy” sounds reasonable. But in practice it means putting off the necessary sharp reductions in greenhouse gas emissions for further decades, guaranteeing that climate catastrophe will grow worse and worse. Indeed, the trade union letter backing KXL goes on to say, “Alternative energy sources are generally still in developmental stages; therefore it is likely the U.S. Consumer will remain substantially dependent on carbon fuels for the next several decades.” Any policy based on the assumption that the United States will “remain substantially dependent on carbon fuels for the next several decades” is condemning American working people, all Americans, and indeed the entire world to a fate worse than anything humanity has ever known.

There are a growing number of points in organized labor’s position that could serve as the basis for a very different approach. AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka has argued that “Addressing climate risk is not a distraction” from solving our economic problems. Indeed, it is critical to the solution. “Every factory and power plant; every home and office; every rail line and highway; every vehicle, locomotive, and plane; every school and hospital, must be modernized, upgraded, renovated or replaced with something cleaner, more efficient, less wasteful.” That means “retooling our world.” And that means there is plenty of work to be done. “If we

are going to rebuild, restore, modernize, or replace everything we inherited in just thirty years” we need “the skill and effort of all of us.”

Trumka recognized that this will not happen simply through current market forces. “By themselves, capital markets will not properly incorporate climate risk and reward into pricing investment opportunities.” Investors need “government policies to make sure that critical investments get made—investments in building retrofits, in high speed rail and the smart grid, in carbon capture and sequestration.”¹⁷

Clean renewable energy and energy conservation are cheaper than extreme fossil fuels and nuclear power. They are available right now. Many studies have shown that, dollar for dollar, they produce far more jobs. If labor is to use its political clout to secure more jobs, the best way to do so is to fight for a new energy economy that rapidly phases out carbon-emitting fossil fuels and even more rapidly replaces them with renewable energy and conservation.

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Fighting for “green jobs” is not enough. It must be combined with resisting the drive for extreme energy and a rapid phased transition beyond fossil fuels. (The trendy idea that extreme energy like fracked natural gas and/or nuclear power is the solution disregards the serious liabilities of each.) This will require an economic reorientation far beyond the labor-backed American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009. Just as the United States phased out production of pleasure cars during World War II in the interest of national survival, we will have to phase out our greenhouse gas emitting production and consumption in the interest of human survival. Every dollar we invest in fossil fuels is not only a dollar that goes to intensify the climate crisis; it is also a dollar that

we should instead be spending for the transition to renewable energy.

Such an approach of course raises the question of what will happen to the workers in the phased out sectors. Although the global labor movement has strongly advocated for a “just transition” that protects current workers as we transition to a climate-safe economy, much of American labor has been slow coming around to support that approach. Trumka recently said he supports a “Just Transition” to a “low carbon-emissions economy.” Now we need to produce concrete plans for how to protect miners, power plant workers, and others directly affected by climate protection measures.

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It is time for American labor to walk the walk. The climate crisis is here and now. To continue business as usual in the face of it is like ignoring the advance of an enemy army. If the labor movement is to have a future, it will have to be as part of a wider movement for transition to sustainability. The goal of such a movement will have to be a new economy that protects the environment while it provides for the needs of the world’s people.

Labor has been critical of corporate short-term thinking, maximizing profits on a quarterly basis and not looking to the future. Yet labor manifests similar short-term thinking when it comes to climate and sustainability. Of course, unions have to balance the immediate needs of their members with those of the future. But exclusively short-term thinking is bad for the planet and its people, and equally bad for the future of the labor movement. Developing a more adequate approach to climate change will inevitably involve tension within the labor movement—but so did the transformations that challenged the movement’s previous acceptance of racism, immigrant exclusion, and knee-jerk militarism.

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