

Towards a Progressive Labor Vision for Climate Justice and Energy Transition in the Time of Trump

admin

Discussion document submitted to Labor for Our Revolution (LFOR)

(“Our Revolution” is a broad-based effort inspired by the US presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders. The unions that supported the Sanders campaign – such as National Nurses United, Communication Workers of America, American Postal Workers Union, United Electrical Workers, Amalgamated Transit Union, and more than 30 IBEW locals) are connected to a grouping called Labor for Our Revolution).

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This memorandum proposes an analysis and provisional framework around which to construct an ambitious and effective agenda for progressive labor to respond to the converging environmental crises, and to pursue a rapid, inclusive approach to energy transition and social justice.

Such an agenda could serve to bring a much-needed *independent* union voice to policy and programmatic debates on climate change and energy within ***Our Revolution*** spaces and processes. Labor’s voice in these debates frequently echoes the large energy companies on one side, or the large mainstream environmental NGOs on the other.

Unions that supported Bernie, alongside other union locals and individual leaders and activists who participate in **Labor for Our Revolution** (LFOR), understand that we cannot afford to regard environmental issues and climate change as peripheral concerns situated outside of labor’s “core agenda.” This is not the place to review the science, but recent [assessments](#) from climate scientists, already sobering, have become increasingly grave. The [health impacts](#) of rising airborne pollution and warming temperatures already cut short the lives of millions on an annual basis, and will increasingly do so without a major change in direction.

Importantly, a global movement has emerged that today challenges the destructive trajectory of “business as usual.” This is a movement that progressive labor in the US can work with and should support.

Progressive labor can and should articulate a clear alternative to the anti-scientific, “energy superpower” agenda being advanced by Trump—an alternative that can help build and strengthen alliances with the climate and environmental justice movements. Progressive unions are already involved in [Labor Network for Sustainability](#) (LNS) and / or [Trade Unions for Energy Democracy](#) (TUED); both LNS and TUED bring significant experience and capacity, and can serve as platforms for expanded and accelerated collaboration and programmatic work.

Many would agree that progressive labor’s approach must be science-based and internationalist. It must aspire to be socially and economically transformative, and must be able simultaneously to inspire and mobilize union members, and provide a basis for durable, effective alliances with other social movements. This, then, is our starting point.

At the same time, progressive labor’s approach must recognize that incremental efforts to “move the needle” are no longer sufficient. For this reason, such an approach must also be built around clear programmatic commitments that are evidence-based, grounded in a realistic assessment of the urgency, and commensurate to the task.

Labor’s Divisions around Energy and Environment

It is widely known that the US labor movement is currently deeply divided on a range of issues. But energy, climate and environmental policies have been at the center of a number of key struggles within labor—key among them the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines.

Key unions in construction and manufacturing have openly embraced Trump’s “energy superpower” fossil fuels agenda. The day after his inauguration, Trump met with top union leaders in the White House—a delegation led by the North American Building Trades Unions (NABTU). A NABTU [press statement](#) issued after the meeting declared, “Today was a great day for America and for American workers.”

The launch of NABTU in 2015 came on the heels of several years of open disagreement between unions over the Keystone XL pipeline. In mid-2016, NABTU openly and angrily opposed the AFL-CIO’s [proposal](#) to join Tom Steyer’s For Our Future super-PAC because of Steyer’s support for environmental causes. Late last year, NABTU successfully pressured AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka to issue a statement supporting the Dakota Access pipeline. NABTU publicly disparaged leaders of the Standing Rock Sioux and organizations that supported the NoDAPL fight—including unions involved with LFOR.

Union Resistance to the “Export Carbon” Agenda

Many of the same unions that supported the Sanders campaign have also actively opposed the agenda of the Koch Brothers and their allies in business and politics. These unions opposed the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, fracking (including Senator Clinton’s flimsy regulatory proposals), “[petcoke](#)” pollution in poor neighborhoods, the surface transportation of highly combustible shale oil and gas, and infrastructure projects like refinery expansions, new coal and gas export terminals, etc., that “lock in” emissions and pollution for decades to come. The level of oppositional activism (sometimes called “blockadia”) has grown enormously, and progressive unions have played an important role in the victories won.

This resistance has collided with some of the most powerful corporations on the planet. With energy demand flat in the US due to the effects of the 2008 recession and other factors, US energy companies are repositioning themselves to export more coal, oil and gas to energy-hungry economies like China, Korea, Japan and the EU. (Gas prices in Japan are currently more than double those in the US.)

The Sanders Approach to Energy and Climate Change

The Sanders' Presidential campaign broke new ground by making climate change a central part of the progressive political agenda in the US. Sanders went further than Obama in terms of both policy ambition and willingness to stand in clear opposition to the corrosive political influence of the big energy companies and their backers. Sanders' calls for a "just transition" for fossil fuel workers called much-needed attention to the legitimate concerns of workers who stand to be most immediately affected by a transition to renewable energy. His call for a national ban on fracking resonated with millions.

However, implementing an effective climate agenda in a way that can sustain broad political support over many years will involve dealing with a range of technical, financial and administrative questions. This task cannot be left to the environmental NGOs. Unions involved with LFOR can play an important role here, and doing so could greatly strengthen *Our Revolution*.

Science, Targets, and the Global Climate Talks

Progressive labor is in a position to develop a clear and compelling vision around energy, climate change, and a more sustainable economy.

Central to that vision is the need to commit to strong, science-based emissions reduction targets. The AFL-CIO has never supported the established timetable for emissions reductions proposed by the [IPCC](#) and featured in the Paris Climate Agreement.

The national commitments submitted in Paris fall short of what the science says are necessary, and unions around the world are working alongside social movements to close the gap. Bernie unions and progressive labor more broadly can be part of that effort, beginning with the November 2017 UN climate talks in Bonn.

An Economy-Wide and Transformative Approach

In the US, serious programmatic work needs to take place over the next several years, in order to determine concretely how emissions reduction targets can be met, and how vague calls for "more ambition" can be replaced by specific strategies for transformation. This work needs to be cross-sectoral, and it needs to challenge assumptions about the "green transition" that have turned out to be false. Angering environmentalists, some unions opposed the EPA's Clean Power Plan because it focuses too much on reducing emissions from power generation, and ignores emissions from other sectors, particularly transport. These unions have a point; an economy-wide approach is clearly needed. A progressive labor approach will need to consider and tackle a broader set of challenges, such as the chaos of "liberalized" electricity markets, the need for public transport that is modern, safe and flexible, and an approach to food supply chains that can boost local agriculture and dramatically reduce the enormous waste in the current food system.

Unions associated with LFOR could begin by making an assessment of the possibilities for developing a new movement—building vision, and working out, in broad terms, a viable political strategy for the next several years. TUED and LNS could help in that effort.

"Green Jobs" — a Tired Phrase, an Unconvincing Promise

Such an assessment could begin with a review of the past decade or so. In the early

2000s the labor-supported Apollo Alliance developed policies that were designed to transcend traditional divisions over “jobs vs. the environment” and to “rebuild the middle class.” It emphasized “green growth” and “green jobs.” The Blue Green Alliance (BGA) took up this work after 2006. Many unions—including some from the Trades—supported the BGA, and a number continue to do so. The agenda was focused on manufacturing and designed to restore US competitiveness, and aimed to build ties with “green business” and elected officials. When it was first introduced into the public discourse, the message was fresh and compelling—but today its limitations are quite glaring.

Candidly, the BGA approach has serious programmatic shortcomings that progressive labor can address. The large NGOs that work in BGA generally support market-based approaches to “incentivize” green sectors like wind and solar, which are mostly non-union and heavily dependent on imported components. During the past several years, BGA has prioritized extending tax breaks and other green incentives within the Obama Administration’s economic stimulus package, or ARRA. This is not unimportant, but the “green jobs” narrative has failed to engage numerous constituencies of potential allies in the struggle for better health, workplace and environmental protections for all, and for broader social, economic and ecological justice.

As an organizing tool, the phrase “green jobs” today offers little for progressive labor to work with. At best, the phrase has become a placeholder for a comprehensive progressive labor approach to energy and climate change that has yet to be fully articulated. At worst, it provides cover for further privatizations and exclusion of unions from the new “green” sectors, and fuels the kind of political backlash that helped elect Trump.

Lessons from the International Experience

In several other countries, unions are supporting and pioneering alternative approaches that recognize the need for greater public and social control of energy, financial services and investment, etc. In the UK, unions have rallied behind the Labour Party that, under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, is openly calling for returning control of the energy sector to public ownership in order to drive an aggressive commitment to renewable energy. In Germany, dozens of cities have set up new municipal utilities since 2005 in order to take their energy systems back into public hands. In Canada, some large unions are supporting *The Leap Manifesto*, which, among other things, advocates for democratic control over energy systems, and turning public post offices into community hubs that generate solar power and offer low-cost financial services (i.e., postal banking) to those currently in the clutches of payday loan sharks. In both South Africa and Australia, unions are preparing national “just transition” campaigns to protect the livelihoods of workers in coal and power generation, while raising the need for large-scale public renewable power (PRP).

Unions in the US are already beginning to connect with these initiatives and approaches, aware of the fact that policy-based internationalism can have practical implications in building a progressive labor agenda here at home.

Short-term Challenges

Progressive labor’s resistance to the “export carbon” agenda of Trump and the large energy companies, however, faces short-term challenges. For example, we need

quickly to reach a sound consensus position on the Paris Climate Agreement. Trump has threatened to [pull out](#) of the Agreement—a threat that has been almost universally condemned and which he may have fulfilled by the time LFOR convenes in Chicago. But the US’ commitment was extremely weak to begin with, and the scenario of withdrawal—and perhaps re-entry in the next few years—may present an opportunity for progressive labor to demand more from the US than the Obama administration’s low level of ambition. Unions have also been mostly silent on Trump’s [order to the EPA](#) to “review” Obama’s fuel efficiency standards.

Progressive labor should debate and decide how to respond to the Sanders-Merkley “100 by 50” Senate bill which, while at this point mostly symbolic, aims to build a US economy powered 100% by renewable energy by 2050. This commitment sounds ambitious, but the policies proposed to reach it don’t seem remotely likely to do so. Over the next two years, progressive labor can work with Sanders and Merkley and help strengthen the content of the bill.

Encouragingly, progressive unions spoke with [one voice](#) in the case of DAPL, as well as around the April 29 “People’s Climate March” actions. When and where appropriate, LFOR can play a role in helping to coordinate responses to these near-term challenges.

Towards a Policy and Programmatic Framework

The following is intended as an initial step towards development of an ambitious, pro-active, independent, labor-led program of action for the period ahead.

Resist

- Resist energy-related land seizures, despoliation, and violation of indigenous rights and territories.
- Resist shale oil and gas drilling and associated infrastructure (pipelines, export platforms, etc.), especially on federal and tribal lands.
- Resist policies that seek to export fracking methods, practices, and regulatory rollback to other countries.
- Encourage union pension funds (both public and Taft Hartley) to divest from fossil fuels, and reinvest in renewable energy projects.
- Advocate state-level moratoria on shale gas and oil drilling.
- Demand the repeal (and replacement where appropriate) of laws currently impeding a publicly driven, socially just energy transition.

Reclaim

- Fight to reverse state-level “electricity market restructuring” and to reform Investor Owned Utilities. Review the Public Utilities Regulatory Policy Act (PURPA) in order to determine whether it should be repealed in order to restore States’ power to make their own energy choices.
- Re-invent regulatory bodies for the power industry, establish mechanisms for meaningful public involvement and democratic decision-making.
- Defend the powers of public agencies such as the EPA to regulate greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution of air, water and land, and to aggressively enforce compliance.
- Work to expand the EPA’s ability to measure, report and regulate methane

leakage, as well as chemicals used in “fracking” and other fossil fuel-related processes.

- Investigate and pursue new ways to use union pension funds in order to maximize their impact for a “public goods” approach to energy provision and climate change mitigation.
- Reinvent public infrastructure, beginning with the postal service in order to drive local renewable energy generation and to provide financial services for working class people who need them.

Restructure

- Demand energy sector reform to allow for a just transition to renewables under public and community control.
- Strengthen regulatory bodies to ensure that Investor Owned Utilities (IOUs) (should they remain in private hands) serve the public good.
- Demand establishment of dedicated, priority revenue streams for public renewables and a “just transition fund,” to be funded via a Financial Transaction Tax.
- Establish debt-issuing municipal level public utilities to pivot towards renewables
- Reject costly Power Purchase Agreements; re-establish full control over electricity prices in order to guarantee timely and satisfactory returns for public investments in renewables.
- Demand adequately funded, modern and available public transit systems, including the development of public fleets of electric vehicles for urban mobility.

Solidarity and Just Transition

- Build active solidarity with all those struggling against large fossil fuel interests and their infrastructure projects.
- Prioritize coal communities for just transition assistance. Meanwhile, support struggles of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to protect the healthcare and pension needs of their members and retirees, and oppose coal plant closures until plans are in place to address the needs of displaced workers and stranded communities, and demand such plans be developed as a matter of urgency.
- Help farmers and small landowners recover from the impacts of fracking.
- Build active solidarity with workers in the energy sector who are under threat of losing their jobs and incomes as a result of fuel switching, underinvestment, and price wars.

Internationalism

- Join with other unions and social movements around the world to demand more ambitious and more serious commitments from governments at the 2017 UN climate talks in Bonn (COP23), and at subsequent meetings.
- Demand that the US government strengthen its GHG reduction commitments beyond the weak Obama-era targets.
- Call for strong commitments from Governments to fund climate adaptation where needed, especially for meeting basic human needs and providing essential public services, prioritizing health-related and emergency services.

- Oppose intellectual property restrictions that impede the sharing of climate-friendly technologies.
- Encourage global trade union bodies to further support climate justice, energy democracy, and essential public services.