

By Sean Sweeney

MORE THAN GREEN JOBS

Time for a New Climate Policy for Labor

U.S. LABOR'S ROLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GLOBAL WARMING IS AKIN TO MIT meteorologist Edward Lorenz's "butterfly effect"—the concept that small events can have large, widespread consequences. The sometimes surgical interventions of key unions on Capitol Hill this past spring have helped shape and then pass—by a narrow margin—a major piece of clean energy and climate protection legislation. Adopted by the House in late June, the American Clean Energy Security Act (ACES) could decide how quickly and effectively the world responds to the

threat of climate change. That unions were on the progressive side of this critically important vote is remarkable given their troubled history with the issue. But labor still has some serious obstacles to negotiate before it can arrive at a truly forward-looking and movement-building climate and energy policy, one that brings the economic and social needs of workers into full alignment with a science-based climate protection program. Firstly, labor must fully accept the idea that policy must actually be guided by science—and this is not negotiable. Secondly, unions need to reconsider their commitment to a future based on coal, because nothing is cooking the climate faster than coal use. Thirdly, more unions need to be fully engaged in the fight against global warming

in order to develop and then mobilize around a bold approach that champions social justice both at home and internationally.

POLITICS VS. SCIENCE

THE ACES BILL WAS SUPPORTED BY A broad coalition of environmental groups, unions, and businesses. As of this writing, the bill is in the Senate. Unions have helped ensure that the fourteen-hundred-page House bill protects existing jobs, establishes prevailing wage provisions, and funds worker training while it establishes a pathway to cut greenhouse gas emissions substantially—a 17 percent reduction below 2005 levels by 2020, and 83 percent by 2050. However, Friends of

the Earth and Greenpeace opposed the bill on the grounds that it will fail to stave off the worst effects of climate change. They regard the bill's planned reductions in U.S. emissions to be inadequate; it rewards and emboldens fossil fuel industries, and will impede rather than help the global effort to reduce global warming pollution by encouraging other countries to soft-pedal their own reduction commitments. Environmental groups supporting ACES generally accept that it fails to do enough in the near to medium term—but given the political realities in Congress, they regard the bill as an important first step at a time when further delay could be catastrophic. ACES will reduce U.S. emissions by around 4 percent below 1990 levels by 2020—way short of the 25-40 percent reductions below 1990 levels the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provided as a range industrialized nations would need to meet by 2020 in order to keep the earth's temperature increase to within two degrees Celsius. Scientists say the two-degree target is essential to giving human society a fifty-fifty chance of avoiding the most dangerous effects of global warming.

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Meanwhile, climate pessimism is rampant. A February 2009 meeting of top IPCC-linked scientists declared that a “worst case scenario” for emissions and the earth's climate is now unfolding. With the December meeting of the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen

fast approaching, 2009 is in some respects a watershed year for our climate, and one that may define Obama's historical legacy more than any other.

GREEN JOBS AND AN INDUSTRIAL RENAISSANCE

LABOR'S APPROACH TO CLIMATE PROTECTION is changing. The efforts of the Apollo Alliance and the Steelworkers- and Sierra Club-led Blue Green Alliance (among others) have ensured that labor's once strongly defensive posture has softened, as unions have begun to integrate climate protection into a new industrial policy conversation. In 1997, the AFL-CIO forcefully opposed the Kyoto agreement because it did not require comparable emissions cuts from developing countries and because it feared the agreement would accelerate offshoring and the loss of manufacturing jobs. The fact that per capita emissions from the U.S. were (and remain) as much as six times higher than China's and ten times higher than India's cut no ice with union leaders at the time. A host of unions are now rallying behind the idea that the fight against global warming could drive an industrial renaissance and the rebuilding of the middle-class. The expansion of renewable energy, making buildings and industry more energy efficient, and the need to produce fuel efficient vehicles are core components of a new policy conversation taking place at national, state, and municipal levels—a conversation that has given the “green job” an almost iconic status.

Nevertheless, the green jobs buzz around labor does not mean that the “jobs versus environment” war is over—or that it's all “win-win” from now on. Climate change is no ordinary challenge, and it's possible to expand green jobs tenfold and still not do enough to fight global

warming emissions. There is a danger, then, that the green job can become a fig leaf for unions and policy makers who are anxious to create employment in new, green industries but are less keen about reducing emissions because they fear that existing, and mainly blue-collar, jobs might be threatened.

LABOR'S CAUTIOUS APPROACH

GREEN JOBS FEVER IS ON THE RISE, BUT the voice of labor in shaping climate policy is really led by a small chorus of unions in power generation and industry. Unions in the public sector, services, and some transportation unions—representing perhaps two-thirds of the U.S.'s sixteen million union members—have no real climate and energy policy to speak of and have thus far let unions

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like the Mineworkers, IBEW, and Steelworkers formulate labor's policy and wage its legislative battles. The prospect of green employment in energy conservation has meant that building trades unions like the Laborers are pursuing green policies, and the Teamsters' innovative "driving green" approach to sustainable supply chains is another important initiative. Climate-friendly union projects are proliferating, but no amount of emphasis on green jobs will produce a coherent and science-based climate policy.

The unions most engaged in climate and energy issues have thus far encouraged the

U.S. to take a cautious approach to climate protection. In order to pass the ACES bill, labor and industry forces pushed sponsors Waxman and Markey to cushion the impact on key industries and slow the pace of emissions reductions. Obama's campaign commitment to establish a 100 percent auction of permits under a cap-and-trade system quickly fell by the wayside, as about 85 percent of permits under ACES will be distributed as free allowances in its first two years. A good portion of allowances will go to industry. The allowances to the auto sector are to be used to retool U.S. domestic- and foreign-owned factories for the production of advanced-technology vehicles and their key components. The UAW has consistently urged that the federal government extend low-interest loans to reduce the financial risk associated with introducing new technology needed to meet fuel efficiency standards. The Steelworkers have also made a strong case for ensuring that a price on carbon introduced under a cap-and-trade system not be allowed to harm U.S. manufacturers in a way that destroys jobs at home, while driving companies overseas to countries like China where industry is less energy efficient—thus leading to "carbon leakage." The union supported the bill's border adjustment measures (a carbon tariff) and

allowances for producers, and urged that they be even stronger. Supporting U.S. companies in making the transition to cleaner production methods sounds like sound industrial policy, but it comes at a price. As Obama's 100 percent auction pledge went down, so did the prospect of generating the substantial public revenues that the president had hoped would drive green investments and create the green jobs about which unions are understandably enthusiastic.

Finding the right balance between the "protect then green" approach to existing industries and the need for adequate investment in

a future green economy is not easy, especially when the U.S. does not have the kind of social safety net seen in many European countries. Unions there are often more willing to take a forward-looking approach because the consequences of job loss are generally less painful than they are in the U.S.

THE BLACK-BLUE ALLIANCE

BUT THE MOST SERIOUS OBSTACLE TO U.S. labor ever arriving at a progressive climate policy is its commitment to a future based on coal. There is almost no debate in the broader labor movement on this issue, and that needs to change for several reasons. Firstly, while some union leaders like to talk about “clean coal,” the idea is largely the construction of the coal industry. Coal is responsible for 29 percent of U.S. emissions, and commercial-scale carbon capture and sequestration (CCS), which may make coal considerably cleaner, is a good ten or fifteen years away. Funding CCS demonstration projects in order to see if the technologies can actually work makes sense, but building new coal plants today with the hope

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that coal might be clean in the future plainly does not. Secondly, the \$60 billion in ACES allocated for CCS dwarfs the money available for basic research and development. Renewable energy advocates are none too happy with the fact that coal is the big winner when the employment and climate benefits are clearly on the side of wind, solar, geothermal, and other

non-emitting renewable sources of power. The renewable energy targets in the ACES bill have been pared back accordingly, and barely meet business as usual projections for 2020.¹

Thirdly, a future based on coal is the main reason for the AFL-CIO’s unwillingness to commit to science-based emissions reduction targets. In 2008, it supported the least ambitious bill being considered by Congress, the Low Carbon Economy Act (Bingaman-Specter) which offered only modest emissions reductions—2006 levels by 2020, and 1990 levels by 2030—and included a “safety valve” limit on carbon prices that could have blocked all pollution reductions if credits went higher than that price.² Moreover, at the December 2008 UN climate meeting in Poland, the AFL-CIO broke with the International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) call for governments to pursue science-based targets. The AFL-CIO produced its own statement, which pointed out that “[The U.S.’s] high degree of dependence on fossil fuels generally, and on coal for electric generation, poses unique challenges for structuring near-term climate change

policies that would not unduly harm workers, the economy, and consumers.”

Power generation unions are not oblivious to the threat of climate change and are fully aware of the huge contribution coal use makes to the U.S. emissions. They acknowledge the need to fight global warming, although for these unions a big part of the answer lies in nuclear power, new and more efficient coal plants, and the development of CCS.³ However, with CCS somewhere on the distant horizon, the AFL-CIO will remain unable to support the critically important 2020 targets proposed by the scientific community—unless other unions make it their business to call for a different policy. The zero-carbon energy proposals

put forward by Al Gore and others—which largely phase out coal over a one- or two-decade period beginning with the oldest and dirtiest plants—are therefore rejected out of hand.

OBAMA'S COPENHAGEN DILEMMA

UNION RESISTANCE TO TARGETS WILL not help Obama's attempt to show some leadership in the global climate negotiations in Copenhagen. As of this writing, the president's campaign pledge to "restore science" to climate policy is in danger, as key voices in his administration have said that the IPCC's proposed reductions are "unrealistic." The implications of this retreat are enormous. When it comes to fighting global warming, this is clearly not a time for small plans. The problem for Obama is that, while ACES amounts to a very big plan in the context of U.S. politics, it is actually a very small plan when measured against scientific necessity. Other developed countries like Japan and Australia are now

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proposing reductions that also fall way short of the cuts the IPCC says are necessary. The U.S. commitment therefore sets the standard for others—and the standard is profoundly inadequate. Countries like China and India will not move to decarbonize their own development without rich countries taking the lead. And the prospect of the U.S. funding CCS sends a signal that their policy of bringing more coal on line is OK for now. The Copenhagen talks are already in trouble; Obama faces not a hero's welcome but one marked by frustration and disappointment.

TOWARD A NEW CLIMATE POLICY FOR LABOR

IF LABOR WANTS TO BE A PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL movement committed to fundamental change, then it needs a new climate policy. The main features of this policy are already visible, but will ultimately depend on more unions making climate protection a priority.

Firstly, U.S. labor should join the rest of international labor and embrace science-based emissions targets. The fight against global warming has to begin in earnest now, and not when the coal industry develops CCS with public money. Similarly, to insist that the U.S. faces a "unique challenge" in its dependence on fossil fuels is not only myopic; it's blind to the fact that many countries have begun to pivot decisively away from fossil fuels toward renewable energy, and the U.S. can and should do the same. The only thing that's remarkable about the U.S. is that its per capita emissions are twice as high as Europe's and now exceed twenty tons of carbon dioxide annually. Importantly, several studies have shown that the U.S. can make deep cuts in emissions in a way that will bring major economic and social dividends. For example, a 2009 Union of Concerned Scientists report explains how the U.S. could achieve reductions of roughly 26 percent below 2005 levels by 2020, and 56 percent below 2005 levels by 2030—while saving consumers and businesses billions of dollars in energy costs.⁴ An aggressive approach to climate protection is not only infinitely better from an environmental standpoint than labor's presently cautious approach, but it will: generate green employment by ramping up renewable energy; drive massive energy efficiency investments in buildings and industry; expand public mass transit; and develop fuel efficient and electric vehicles. For labor, the components of an aggressive approach are compatible with the economic and social interests of workers and the vast majority of union members.

Encouragingly, several unions—such as the Blue Green Alliance (BGA) partners (the Steelworkers, IUE-CWA, SEIU, and Laborers), the TWU, and the Building and Construction Trades⁵—now support science-based emissions reduction targets for 2050. However, for 2020, BGA unions support 14-25 percent reductions on 2005 levels. The 14 percent is lower than the ACES bill’s 17 percent cut, although the 25 percent is considerably more ambitious. To some this may sound like hair-splitting futurology—but the range reflects some of the difficulties unions in different sectors are having with targets and timetables. Moreover, in terms of the creation of green jobs, generating more clean energy, and affecting the climate over the long term, the difference between a 14 percent and a 25 percent target is hugely significant. Nevertheless, this recognition of the need for climate policy to be guided by science—and not by “blue dog” Democrats close to coal, agribusiness, and industrial interests—provides a platform for a new labor approach.

Unions cannot afford to squander the movement-building opportunities a progressive climate policy might present.

Secondly, unions need to re-think their commitment to coal and coal-industry priorities. The number of workers in capital-intensive coal mining and power generation has plummeted, and there are probably fewer than twenty thousand working miners with a

union card. The average age of a miner is over fifty. A two-decade phase out of coal would be a relatively painless way of addressing the massive volume of emissions generated by coal. Miners over a certain age could be offered full income, pensions, and health care coverage up to retirement age. Given the \$1 trillion-plus bailout of the banks, this is hardly a big ticket item. Younger miners could be employed with comparable pay and benefits in public work schemes, repairing the damage caused by ecologically horrendous mining methods like mountain top removal. Targeted public investment in impacted communities could create other job options. Meanwhile, renewable energy is not only more labor-intensive than fossil-based energy—it has obvious climate and health benefits and will stimulate domestic manufacturing. Unions must be universally committed to a future based on renewable energy, while urging—as Canadian unions have done—governmental intervention in the development of a new green energy sector that is publicly-regulated and predominantly publicly-owned.⁶

Thirdly, more unions need to get involved. Unions who prioritize organizing and social justice cannot afford to squander the movement-building opportunities a progressive climate policy might present. The “Green for All” discussion is one of the most important conversations in labor circles today—and equity issues lie at the heart of the challenge of global warming. Unions committed to the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), health care reform, and support for immigrant rights also need to be uncompromising on climate protection, help strengthen the legislation, and urge the president to weigh in heavily on the need for determined domestic and global action.

1. The Boilermakers have been clear that utilities should receive a certain number of free allowances, and that the auction revenues generated by cap-and-trade should be returned to the industry in the form of tax credits for CCS (as well as other technologies) to reduce emissions. They've also argued that a cap on emissions set too low would drive producers away from coal to natural gas—with negative consequences for their members.

2. The Building and Construction Trades later endorsed the more aggressive (but later defeated) Lieberman-Warner bill, although the IBEW remained opposed.

3. "AFL-CIO Perspective on the Negotiation of a New Global Climate Agreement" (memo, distributed in November 2008).

4. Rachel Cleetus, Steven Clemmer, and David Friedman, Union of Concerned Scientists, "Climate 2030: A National Blueprint for a Clean Energy Economy," news release, May 2009, www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/global_warming/climate-2030-report.pdf.

5. The SEIU's 2008 convention resolution on climate change includes this sentence: "We [the SEIU] stand ready to do our part to address the global climate crisis, including supporting emission reduction targets based on sound science," <http://www.seiu.org/ourunion/service-employees-international-union-resolution-on-jobs-and-the-environment.php>. The Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO issued a statement on January 5, 2009 that included: "Greening the economy should go well beyond rhetoric and should actually impact the impending environmental catastrophe that awaits us if we fail to reverse global warming within the ambitious time frames President-elect Obama has articulated and scientists believe to be non-negotiable while, at the same time, addressing the very real and legitimate concerns of workers who will be impacted by clean energy strategies."

6. The "Climate Change and Green Jobs" resolution was adopted at the Canadian Labour Congress's twenty-fifth Constitutional Convention, May 26-30, 2008.