Agenda for Just Transition to Sustainable Environmental Justice

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RESOLVED*

DSA encourages locals to designate contact persons for a DSA Environmental Justice Network.

*The Convention votes only on action items, not on the Whereas clauses.

WHEREAS

Corporate capitalism is on a course toward planetary catastrophe, threatening everyone, but especially poor people who contribute least to the crisis but are most threatened by immediate loss of their livelihoods.

People even in the USA are now recognizing that accelerating extreme weather just ain’t natural.

The growing movement for a just transition to environmental sustainability is making a conscious commitment to include front line communities of low income people, especially people of color, and workers, especially workers liable to be displaced as unsustainable production is phased out. This movement, influenced by leaders like Bill McKibben, Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Van Jones and Naomi Klein, is calling for “System Change, not climate change.” But many of the new activists in this movement have only vague ideas about system change – what can replace corporate capitalism, and how to achieve it.

Converting to an environmentally sustainable and socially just production system, a change as radical as the Industrial revolution, will require fundamental political and social change on every scale from household to planet. This is not just desirable, like abolishing poverty and ending class rule, but a survival necessity for huge numbers of people.

Human and environmental needs can be sustainably balanced only if production takes full account of all environmental and human consequences. People affected must participate in planning and decision-making, not just authorities and experts. The interests of future generations and fellow creatures can only be defended by people in the present with values of empathy and solidarity, following the Precautionary Principle: when in doubt, safety first.

A sustainable economy requires a system in which production is democratically planned and controlled by well-informed people, by direct local participation within representative democratic structures in the interdependent web of the world economy. The environment can be sustained by collective stewardship, using recycled materials and renewable energy, and protecting vital ecosystems as commons. As Gandhi said, “there is enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.” Our material needs can be securely met by a fair distribution and sharing of resources, as our psychological needs are met through an ethos fostering cooperation rather than acquisition and competition.

System change can only be achieved by organizing enough of the 99% into a sustainable coalition to overcome corporate power. The divide-and-rule strategy the 1% use to stay on top can be met by choosing intersectional issues linking sustainability with social and economic justice, and by choosing strategies that can change the balance of power from corporate plutocrats to the vast majority, opening the path to a new system.

When we work in local protest and organizing movements, we will strive to unite diverse communities, to link sustainability with social justice, and to promote a global perspective, democratic participation, and understanding of the need for systemic change. Some common sense transitional goals and objectives to build solidarity across movements, shift power from corporations to the 99% and advance toward a just and sustainable world, include:

**Green Jobs:** replacing transportation, manufacturing, building and electric generation systems to use renewable energy must be the core of a sustainable economy, creating millions of domestic jobs. Those should be living wage, union jobs, actively hiring and training workers from underemployed and underpaid communities, as Van Jones emphasizes.

**Publicly owned or cooperative utilities** can be more accountable, affordable and sustainable. Programs enabling households to install clean energy systems now and “pay as you save” on utility bills can speed deployment. The transition can be paid for by taxes on greenhouse pollution, concentrated wealth, and financial speculation.

**Fair trade:** we need rules for the world economy that reverse the priorities of so-called “free trade” agreements which privilege the property rights of corporations, investors and speculators over human rights and nature. Environmental health, economic justice, sustainable development and political democracy must prevail over commercial values; only a global transition can save the global commons. The nations that have become wealthy by exploiting a one-time fossil fuel bonanza must pay for the less developed countries’ right to develop, going directly to renewable energy.

**Uprooting environmental racism:** the worst hazards are imposed on low income minority communities, who originated the concept of Environmental Justice, fighting for a voice in decisions that affect their health and survival. All environmental
movements must include their voices in deciding goals and strategy. Toxic production will end only when all communities have the power to defend themselves against becoming dumping grounds and sacrifice zones.

**Grass roots campaigns to stop hazardous technologies:** fighting pipelines, hydrofracking and other fossil fuel infrastructure, toxic dumps, incinerators and nuclear plants can all be starting points for movements to demand systemic alternatives. "NIMBY" - Not In My Back Yard - attitudes can be reactionary and divisive when opposing socially progressive facilities like drug treatment centers, but are the beginning of democratic accountability when resisting what should not be in anyone’s backyard: “Not On Planet Earth (NOPE).”

**Reproductive choice and family planning:** women have a right to control their fertility, in both developed and developing countries; education of girls is also vital. Unmet demand for birth control is several times net global population growth. By assuring education to all girls and equal job opportunities to women, while making birth control universally available, population can be stabilized while avoiding both authoritarian restrictions and an explosive rise in death rates.

**Healthy workplace environments:** pollutants typically originate in factories where workers are often exposed to high levels of toxic substances, serving as human guinea pigs. Workers and unions are fighting for the right to know and decide what hazards they are exposed to, and the right to refuse unsafe work. When polluting production is shut down, workers must be guaranteed a fair livelihood.

**Organizing diverse forms of economic democracy:** worker and consumer cooperatives, credit unions, cohousing, co-determination in industry, community-supported agriculture, public visioning and participatory budgeting. Local and state public enterprises can serve common needs accountably, eg public broadband internet, public banks and loan funds, land trusts and green banks to finance the initial costs of renewable energy. Local direct democracy can be a base to change national and global power.

**Democratic local and regional planning:** instead of subsidizing developers to destroy communities and landscapes by suburban sprawl, we can invest in existing communities to protect the land, save energy, provide good affordable housing to everyone and reverse spatial inequality. Likewise, we can increase public parks and community gardens, use intensive recycling, and require strict energy standards for new buildings.

**Improving public transit:** transit-oriented development, walkable and bicyclable neighborhoods can reduce energy use and enhance safety and fair access to jobs and recreation. Mixed use zoning can shorten trips and save commuting time.

**Reducing the working week and year:** more free time would facilitate full employment and reduce stress. As Juliet Schor notes, people are happier in societies where wealth and income are more equal and productivity gains are taken as leisure time for recreation and social interaction rather than throughput of disposable stuff. Products should be designed for durability and recycling, not planned obsolescence. We need, in Bill McKibben’s words, "not more belongings, but more belonging."

**Reversing subsidies to corporate agribusiness and junk food:** use extension programs to promote sustainable agriculture, increasing rather than eroding soil fertility. Favor local farmers, stop adding synthetic hormones and antibiotics, end food deserts and the hustling of junk food to children to improve the health of people and the planet.

**Permanently protecting vital ecosystems as commons:** the natural world should be accessible for public enjoyment by all, but not for commercial exploitation. Private enterprise has already cut down 97% of the old growth forest in the United States—practice sustainable forestry there.

**Improving public education:** guarantee quality education for everyone from universal pre-K and afterschool programs to graduate school and lifetime continuing education. Science education should highlight our real challenges, learning by doing. Students can learn biology by growing food, learn physics and chemistry by making renewable energy and recycling systems, and learn civics by practicing self-government.

**Divestiture campaigns against fossil fuel corporations:** switch investments to renewable energy. Energy corporations claim as assets trillions of dollars in oil, coal, and gas reserves which if burned would push the atmosphere past the point of no return. We must avoid runaway positive feedbacks inexorably melting the icecaps and inundating coasts for miles inland, but causing catastrophic floods, superstorms, droughts and crop failures long before.

**Public financing of political campaigns:** concentrated private wealth should not buy elections, drowning out the voice of the 99% in making public policy. Instead enable leadership of, by and for the people to set the agenda, as part of a broader progressive movement to expand voting rights and democracy.

Strong, sustained organizing can create political tipping points and overcome concentrated power: Jim Crow went from obligatory to illegitimate in a few years; indoor smoking went from inescapable to intolerable; same sex marriage is going from impossible to inevitable. The next decade may be the last chance to turn the ship of state around before it hits an iceberg calved off a melting polar glacier. Martin Luther King warned, “Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words ‘too late.’” Whether unsustainable corporate capitalism ends in
catastrophe or a new shared world based on democracy and justice, in harmony with nature, depends on what we can do together.