

THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

August 1, 2019

The global climate crisis is real. Canada's Parliament has declared that we are in a national climate emergency – Canada is warming at twice the global rate. Forests and towns are burning, heatwaves claim more and more lives, and great cities now face once-in-a-century floods every few years. Across the world, climate change is having a disproportionate impact upon racialized communities and Indigenous people, and millions face dislocation. To ensure human survival we must challenge the powerful corporate interests that relentlessly press governments around the world to expand fossil fuel extraction. At the same time, we must show the opportunities to build prosperity and justice for all.

In recent months, students have mounted global school walkouts, cities have declared climate emergencies, unions have demanded that employers climate-proof their operations, and over 150,000 rallied in Quebec. But during the same time period, Conservative governments in Ontario and Alberta have eviscerated their provinces' climate plans while joining in legal challenges to federal carbon pricing. Andrew Scheer will do more of the same if he wins a majority in October.

We cannot underestimate the economic forces that have launched a massive counter-attack since the signing of the Paris Accord in 2015. Billionaires running coal, petroleum and mining empires have funded Trump and numerous right-wing political candidates across the world. They refuse to acknowledge the reality of environmental racism or intense degradation of land and water. Instead, oil lobbyists have crafted a narrative that Canada must "get resources to tidewater" or betray the people of Alberta. Their success is highlighted by the Trudeau Liberals buying and then approving the Trans Mountain Pipeline project to export the world's dirtiest oil to Asia.

On the other hand, there are important steps being taken towards environmental sustainability. Some countries are building enough alternative energy to move away from carbon entirely, or have set timelines to end sales of combustion-engine vehicles. Leading businesses have adopted net-zero goals for their world-wide operations, and more investment funds are divesting from fossil fuels. The concept of Just Transition for workers and communities is being adopted at the international level, and Canada's Just Transition Task Force has issued its report calling for a phase-out of coal. Recent polls show the majority of Canadians are very concerned about Climate Change, even while unsure of carbon pricing. The evidence of climate change – fires, floods, heat waves and droughts – is getting harder to deny. But we are running out of time to make the actual transition to a truly low-carbon economy.

We know from our history that only governments have the capacity to enforce such a dynamic shift in society. But we also know that people must be organized - in a deep, wide, and democratic process – to make it succeed. That is the spirit driving the Green New Deal dialogue as well as the global climate strike movement focusing on the week of September 20-27.

Three years ago, Labour Council published the Greenprint for Greater Toronto, outlining how to engage governments, employers, workers and community allies in strategies to achieve a low-carbon future. It included a call for the creation of a network of union environmental representatives and joint workplace environment committees to help drive this process. Outside of auto plants, that has only been realized at the Toronto District School Board, with education affiliates assisted by the Labour Education Centre. For many unions faced with the ravages of the Ford agenda, climate issues have not been a top priority. Few national or provincial unions have active environment committees. While there may be individual activists who are passionate about the issue, we still have to connect this fight to the day to day reality of our members.

The labour movement in greater Toronto and across Canada must step up to this fundamental challenge. There is a genuine climate emergency, and we have to harness our skills and resources to win the political fight at every level of society, including the fall federal election. This will require activists pushing their own unions to be much more engaged in the issue, as well as forging alliances with community organizations. In the same way that we built a health and safety movement decades ago to challenge the accepted norm of workplace accidents and deaths, today we are called up on to build an equally broad workers' movement on climate justice.

On August 1, the Labour Council resolved to:

1. Reach out to engage every affiliate on labour's role in the fight for climate justice, including winning contract language on climate, establishing joint workplace environment committees and asking employers to climate-proof their work;
2. Urge every affiliate to mobilize their members to defeat the federal Conservatives and oppose the destructive climate policies of Conservative provincial governments;
3. Mobilize a network of activists to take the issue of climate justice to every union convention in the next two years;
4. Call on Labour Councils across the country to be involved in local and national efforts on climate action including actions on September 27th;
5. Partner with racial justice organizations to help deepen the analysis around equity and Just Transition within discussions on climate action;
6. Produce popular material for circulation on the theme of "We'll pay much more later";
7. Support the efforts of students and youth who are highlighting the need to address the climate emergency.