

Connecting Anti-Austerity and Climate Justice Policies

December 26, 2015



Humanity is currently faced with a number of deep and challenging crises: economic, social, political, food, and—last, but not least—the climate crisis, which is threatening the very existence of millions of people on this planet. These crises have many of the same root causes, which go to the core of our economic system. Strong vested interests are involved. Thus we are facing an interest-based struggle.

All over the world, people are organizing and fighting against the effects of these crises. Trade unions are heavily involved in many of these struggles, as are many other movements—single-issue as well as broader social movements. Increasingly, our entire social model, the way we produce and consume, is being questioned. The way out of these crises requires a system change, which can only be achieved if we are able to shift the balance of power in society. This leaves us with the challenge of unifying movements and on-going struggles—particularly to unify the struggle against austerity with the struggle against climate change.

Emissions continue to rise

Governments have been negotiating for more than 20 years (more or less since the Rio Summit in 1992) in order to agree on measures which can save us from the climate crisis. What has happened during those more than 20 years, however, is not the required reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Quite the opposite, emissions have increased immensely, by more than 60% since 1992. Transport emissions have increased 120% over the last 30 years, and they are still increasing all over the world— at a rate that outweighs reductions in other sectors of the economy.

Given the catastrophic effects that global warming will have, why have our governments not been able to agree on necessary measures—which are both possible and realistic—to reduce GHG emissions? It is not because solutions are lacking. The climate crisis can be prevented. We have the knowledge and technology we need. What we lack is the social, political, and economic power sufficient to carry out the measures necessary to stop global warming. It is, in other words, a question of power.

The social, political, and economic power to stop global warming, however, will not come from the economic and political elites who govern us and control big oil and big finance. Only massive pressure from below, from a broad coalition of trade unions, other social movements, environmentalists, and others can save us from climate catastrophe.

An interest-based struggle

We are talking about vested interests, and we are up against some of the most powerful corporations in the world—in cahoots with an army of neoliberal politicians serving their interests. Seven of the ten biggest and most powerful corporations in the world are oil companies. These companies are using all their power to avoid policies that could hurt their economic interests. They execute

enormous economic and political power. Where politicians are for sale, they buy them. Where governments or regimes challenge their power, these companies contribute to getting rid of them.

The effects of the economic, social, and political crises we live with—and have lived with for some time—is another interest-based struggle, and it is not so difficult to identify the different interests. Workers all over the world fight against the crises. They fight for jobs. They fight for decent jobs. They fight for living wages. They fight for social protection. They fight against unemployment. They fight against social degradation. They fight to improve their communities. They fight for their families' livelihoods.

Many of the policies addressing these crises are austerity policies. Austerity policies are not, as some will have it, “necessary cuts in over-expanded public services” or “necessary downward adjustment to make workers' wages competitive.” Austerity is a class-based policy, carried out in order to destroy the welfare state, privatize public property and public services, and defeat the trade union movement—all with the final aim of increasing the return on investment. This represents the main frontline in the current global class war.

Systemic crises

The fight against climate change—against climate catastrophe—is not an additional struggle that the trade union movement must take on, alongside fighting austerity. It is, and will increasingly be, an important part of the same struggle. If climate change is not stopped, or limited to the 1.5 or 2o C, it will become job-killer number one. It will destroy communities. It will destroy millions and millions of jobs, and it will lead to enormous social degradation. It will further redistribute wealth from the bottom to the top, massively increase poverty, and cause emigration crises of unknown dimensions. Our struggle to avoid devastating climate change is therefore an important part of the interest-based struggle for the kind of society we want.

Both the economic crisis and the climate crisis are systemic. They are both rooted in the same economic system: a system which is geared toward making profits rather than producing use values, a system which is dependent on economic growth (a capitalism without growth is a capitalism in crisis), a system which is exploiting workers and over-exploiting natural resources, a crisis-ridden system which again and again creates and recreates mass unemployment, poverty, and misery. Now, this system is also about to destroy planet earth as a place to live for future generations.

Public ownership and democratic control

To stop this we need to act rapidly and forcefully. We are already approaching the point of no return regarding the 2o C threshold of global warming. During the more than two decades of the COP process, we have seen that big oil, big finance, neoliberal governments, and market forces have not been able to solve these problems for us. The same goes for the economic and social crises. On the contrary, they are mobilizing all their power to avoid any restrictions on their desperate hunt for more profit. More austerity and more greenhouse gas emissions are the results.

Therefore, the only way to meet these challenges is to bring these powerful corporations and institutions under democratic control. That requires the mobilization of enormous social and political power. Neither the trade union movement, nor the environmental movement, nor other sectoral social movements, nor single-issue movements are able to win this struggle alone. We need, more than at any time before, to build broad alliances of social movements—and others—if we are to turn the tide in this struggle.

Unify the social with the climate change struggle

Because of its strategic position in society, the trade union movement will have to play a decisive role in this struggle. However, we have to be honest and admit that, so far, the trade union movement has not taken sufficient responsibility in fighting these crises. Trade unions are on the defensive all over the world. There are reasons for that, which I am not going to go deeply into here, even though it is an immensely important issue which I think should have been higher on the agenda in many of the meetings here, not least in the meetings organized by trade unions themselves. Maybe that could also have helped us to go beyond the very narrow, textual preoccupation of the so-called “just transition,” to focus more on the strategies to achieve it.

The main tasks we face today seem quite clear to me. We have to unify the social struggle with the climate change struggle—since the root causes as well as the measures necessary to fight them are mainly identical. We have to build broad alliances—strong enough to mobilize sufficient power to shift the balance of power in society. To bring strategic sectors of our economy into public ownership under democratic control will have to be a decisive part of such a struggle. In the climate change struggle, the energy sector stands at the forefront. CO2 emissions are all about energy, and without bringing it under democratic control, there is no possibility to achieve the transformations we need, deeply and rapidly enough.

Growing pressure from below

The anti-austerity struggle raises the need for public ownership and democratic control in a number of other areas—in defense of public utilities as well as in the fight to bring privatized property and services back under democratic control. The fight against climate change and the fight against austerity cannot be abstract and too general. These struggles have to address concrete problems and solutions in workers’ and people’s daily life. We need to unify and make the struggles broader, as our experiences teach us to do. Most unions today are involved in some kind of anti-austerity fight, and more and more trade unions are joining the campaign against climate change. Initiatives like Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) represent important developments in this regard. What we need now are broad coalitions willing to fight, a more radical agenda, more militancy, and thus a growing pressure from below.

Asbjørn Wahl serves as Chair of the International Transport Workers’ Federation’s Working Group on Climate Change. This text is from his presentation at the panel “Power to the People,” organized by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office and Trade Unions for Energy Democracy at the Peoples’ Climate Summit in Paris, December 5, 2015.

Originally posted here.