

Greening the Union Label

From teachers to transit workers, civil servants to electricians, the People's Climate March will have more organized-labor participation than any environmentalist effort in U.S. history.

More than 50 unions, including some of the city's biggest, are among the organizations sponsoring the march. The Service Employees International Union, the nation's second largest, has endorsed it, and its two main New York locals, the health care workers of Local 1199 and the building service workers of Local 32BJ, are heavily involved. Also on board are District Council 37, the city's largest public employee union; Transport Workers Union Local 100; Local 3 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; the Communications Workers of America, who represent city employees as well as telephone and cable-TV workers; and the city, state and Connecticut affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers.

The sponsors also include labor-based groups such as the Left Labor Project and the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, and "worker centers" that seek to organize low-wage and undocumented workers. Trade Unions for Energy Democracy is bringing union leaders from more than 10 countries, including the United Kingdom, Brazil, India, Korea, Canada and South Africa.

"Labor is marching because climate change affects all of us," says Local 32BJ President Hector Figueroa. "We live in the communities that get destroyed by storms like Sandy. We work in the buildings that get flooded. We get hit by health epidemics like asthma that are rampant in our communities, and we care about the world that we will leave for our children and grandchildren."

“Labor has come to the conclusion that it is a workers’ issue, some of us faster than others,” says Estela Vazquez, a Local 1199 vice president.

Sandy’s Impact

Superstorm Sandy galvanized sentiment about climate change among many union members here. “We saw the impact on our places of work,” says Vazquez. Members were working at NYU Langone Medical Center when it had to be evacuated and at nursing homes in the Rockaways. As health workers, they also worry that global warming will abet the spread of diseases like malaria.

The storm flooded DC 37’s Lower Manhattan headquarters, destroying the building’s electrical system. Members stayed on the job at a water treatment plant in Staten Island when flooding cut it off from land, says Jon Forster, a city scientist and union vice president. “There is a sense that this is urgent.”

Whether that sense translates into turnout, however, depends on unions reaching their members, says Sean Sweeney, co-coordinator of Trade Unions for Energy Democracy. He’s been particularly impressed by the efforts of 32BJ, 1199, the New York State Nurses Association, Electricians Local 3 and the Amalgamated Transit Union, which has two small locals representing bus drivers in Staten Island and Queens.

DC 37 has published two articles about the march in its newspaper, which goes out to 170,000 readers, and handed out thousands of flyers to members and the general public, says communications director Zita Allen. Local 1199 is reaching out to members through social media and has translated materials into Spanish, Russian and Chinese. Local 32BJ has been phone-banking its members and holding meetings and handing out Spanish-language flyers in Washington Heights. Its 2,000 “green supers” – who have completed a course in making

buildings more energy-efficient – “really lead the way in talking to other members about the environment,” says Lenore Friedlaender, who is in charge of member engagement.

“It’s not just a PR thing. There really is a lot of momentum inside labor for this march,” she adds.

Political shift

Such a labor-environmentalist alliance has been a long time coming. The “teamsters and turtles” coalition from the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests dissipated quickly. The BlueGreen Alliance, founded in 2006, brought together the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club, but did not influence the Obama administration to push for a “Green New Deal.” Environmentalists are often stereotyped as an upper-middle-class white movement that cares more about wilderness than jobs.

“We are a one-trick pony. We only care about one thing, and that’s jobs,” a building trades union’s political director told *LaborPress* last fall. “We don’t care about your guns, if dudes can marry dudes, medical marijuana. It’s not our issue.”

In that, there are genuine conflicts. To environmentalists, the Keystone XL tar-sands oil pipeline means “game over” for the climate. To the Laborers International Union of North America, it means 42,000 jobs. For building trades workers, the criticism that these would only be short-term is meaningless. Almost all construction jobs are short-term. Laborers President Terry O’Sullivan has harshly criticized AFL-CIO leader Rich Trumka’s initiatives to unite with environmental groups.

“Green jobs” – alternative energy, retrofitting buildings and public transportation – could be the key to cracking that conundrum. Pete Sikora, a Communications Workers official running for the state Assembly in Brooklyn, believes New York could reduce both income inequality and carbon-dioxide

emissions simply by requiring mandatory energy-efficiency upgrades for buildings.

This, he says, would create “tens of thousands of good, sustainable, mostly union jobs” and pay for itself in energy savings within five years.

Creating a greener New York would include constructing bulkheads, a better drainage system and transportation hubs, says DC 37’s Forster. We should build solar and wind energy facilities instead of a terminal in Long Island Sound for exporting fracking-extracted natural gas, he adds. “One is a green job, the other isn’t.”

“What is the sense in creating short-term jobs when the impact on the planet is negative for all of us?” Local 1199’s Vazquez asks. “We cannot continue mindless consumption.”

But if cars and coal are bad for the environment, how can we change that without condemning miners and autoworkers to Walmart or unemployment? “Labor needs to be weighing in on policy,” says Forster. “If decisions are made, jobs have to be taken into account.”

“I value the work opportunity construction of renewable energy projects will offer building trade workers, and the resulting reduction of the city’s carbon footprint,” Electricians Local 3 head Chris Erikson said at a July press conference for the march. But, he added, “we must weigh the effect on jobs for U.S. citizens and be prudent in the implementation of regulations.”

The environmental movement has also realized that climate change and pollution often hit people of color and the world’s poor hardest, says Vazquez. This rally, she adds, “gives all progressive forces an opportunity to build a new coalition.”

Climate change will never be stopped as long as the market dominates political decisions, Sweeney says, so Trade Unions

for Energy Democracy advocates public ownership of energy production. World energy production could be “completely decarbonized” by 2030, he contends, but it would take an effort on the scale of World War II, such as installing 60,000 3-megawatt wind turbines every year.

“What’s technically possible is different from what’s politically possible,” he says. “We need a really militant climate movement, and labor has to be at the center of it.”

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