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Global Issues

Labour's Response to Climate Change

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Introduction

The ecological crisis is deepening. Despite 17 years of negotiations there is no binding global agreement on the reduction of carbon emissions and such an agreement is unlikely to emerge from COP 17 in Durban in December. In fact carbon emissions are rising which means climate change will intensify and have devastating impacts – particularly on the working class – in the form of rising food prices, water shortages, crop failures and so on. Africa will be the worst affected.

So what is to be done? According to Sean Sweeney: 'In recent years global labor has worked on the premise that the 'real world' historical options are essentially two-fold. Either humanity will transition to some form of "green capitalism" where economic growth is de-linked from emissions and environmental destruction generally, or we face a "suicide capitalism" scenario where fossil-fuel corporations and major industry, agriculture, transport and retail interests are successful in maintaining business as usual' (Sweeney 2011: 9).

Avoiding the suicide scenario and making the transition to a low carbon or 'green' economy will be particularly challenging for us in South Africa given the carbon intensive nature of our economy and the continued dominance of the 'minerals-energy complex'.

Recently the South African labour movement has expressed its commitment to a '*just* transition to a low carbon economy'. However this article argues that this is contentious with very different understandings of the scale and nature of the changes involved. A 'just transition' could involve demands for shallow change focused on protecting vulnerable workers or deep change rooted in a vision of dramatically different forms of production and consumption. In this sense the ecological crisis represents an opportunity: to not only address the unemployment crisis in our society, but to demand the redistribution of power and resources; to challenge the conventional understanding of economic growth and to mobilize for an alternative development path .

It could also generate a new kind of transnational solidarity, larger, deeper and more powerful than anything we have yet seen. Moving beyond solidarities based on interests or identities, Hyman emphasizes that 'the challenge is to reconceptualise solidarity in ways which encompass the local, the national, the European and the global. For unions to survive and thrive, the principle of solidarity must not only be redefined and reinvented: workers on

the ground must be active participants in this redefinition and reinvention' (Hyman 2011:27). Most clearly in its warnings of the threat to human survival, the discourse of climate change could be contributing to such a process.

LABOUR'S RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Obviously the transition to a low carbon or green economy has massive implications for labour. Historically the labour movement in South Africa has neglected environmental issues. This is largely because of a widespread understanding that environmental protection threatened jobs (Cock 2007). Ironically what is now driving trade unions into a concern with climate change is the indirect threat posed to existing energy intensive jobs and the possibility of new 'green' jobs.

'GREEN JOBS'

The simplest definition of green jobs is 'those in existing and new sectors which use processes and produce goods and services aimed at alleviating environmental threats' (UNEP 2008). Some prefer a more narrow focus on 'climate jobs' meaning exclusively those that directly reduce carbon emissions.

A new energy regime clearly means there are opportunities for employment in new sectors such as renewable energy, public transport, agro-ecology and energy efficiency. It is frequently asserted that millions of green jobs will be created worldwide in the next twenty years. For example, according to one study 20 million job will be created globally in the renewable energy sector alone by 2030. (Sustainlabour 2009).

However there are several problems in the current formulations of green jobs:

(i)First, many aspirational claims are made which seem inflated and are not supported by empirical evidence. As Annabella Rosenberg of the IUTC has pointed out 'the impacts of climate change on employment remain mostly unexplored by research'. (Interview, Durban 27 July 2011).

(ii) Second, in the debate on creating a green economy, insufficient attention has been paid to the quality of green jobs (in terms of labour standards and wage levels). Decent work means jobs that pay at least a living wage, and offer training opportunities and some measure of economic and social security. At present the debates around 'green jobs' and 'decent work' do not connect.

(iii) Third, insufficient attention has been paid to job losses.

(iv) Lastly, the question must be confronted: are green jobs one component of a new green capitalism which is turning the climate crisis into an opportunity for accumulation? Or, are

green jobs part of a 'green economy' which – 'based on rights, sustainability principles and decent work - can meet the challenge of a just transition' (Sustainlabour 2011: 2).

Clearly workers and their organizations are an indispensable force for a just transition to a low carbon economy. If we are to move to a low carbon economy using renewable energy instead of coal, it will be workers who will have to build wind, wave, tide and solar power. It is workers who will have to renovate and insulate our homes and buildings, and build new forms of public transport. As Jakopovich (2009) writes, 'Environmentalists are workers and obviously potential allies in their efforts to advance workplace health and safety, and also to tackle environmental concerns of working – class communities: for workers bear the brunt of environmental degradation and destruction, both in terms of health and quality of life issues' (Jakopovich, 2009: 75).

For this reason this article argues for building transnational solidarity networks involving labour and environmental activists. The implication is that labour needs to move away from both the traditional, national level organizational form as well as broadening the conventional focus on jobs and workplace issues to embrace environmental issues.

THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION RESPONSE

Trade unions have participated in the UNFCCC since its inception, under the umbrella of the ITUC which represents 170 million workers through its affiliated organizations in 157 countries.

The ITUC report entitled, *Equity, Justice and Solidarity in the Fight Against Climate Change* (2009) stressed the need 'to create green and decent jobs, transform and improve traditional ones and include democracy and social justice in environmental decision-making processes' (ITUC 2009: 10). A Just Transition is described as 'a tool the trade union movement shares with the international community, aimed at smoothing the shift towards a more sustainable society and providing hope for the capacity of a "green economy" to sustain decent jobs and livelihoods for all'. (ITUC 2009: 14)

According to the UNEP 'the appropriate measures to guarantee a fair transition for potentially affected workers' should include:

- Social protection systems which 'must run in parallel to adaptation efforts as they can diminish vulnerability to climate change and strengthen the social security systems, especially in developing countries'
- Economic diversification policies, able to identify potential job opportunities, and
- Training and requalification progrrammes (UNEP 2008: 66)

THE CONGRESS OF SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS (COSATU) RESPONSE

In recent years the *Congress of South African Trade Unions* (COSATU), a trade union federation with 2 million members and 20 affiliate unions has starting to recognize climate change as a developmental and social issue.

A transformation perspective emerged from the discussions at a 3 day workshop in Durban in July 2011 on climate change convened by the ITUC and COSATU which was attended by representatives from all affiliates, the 3 top office bearers, and representatives from NACTU and FEDUSA. A draft document titled 'A COSATU Policy Framework on Climate Change was discussed at a closed session on the third day and endorsed by the central executive committee of COSATU 2 weeks later.

Fifteen principles were identified including:

- Capitalist accumulation has been the underlying cause of excessive greenhouse gas emissions and therefore global warming and climate change
- A new low carbon development path is needed which addresses the need for decent jobs and the elimination of unemployment
- Food security must be urgently addressed
- All South Africans have the right to clean, safe and affordable energy
- We reject market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions
- Developed countries must pay their climate debt and the Green Climate Fund must be accountable
- A Just Transition towards a low – carbon and climate – resilient society is required

Different Understandings of a 'Just Transition to a Low Carbon Economy: 'Paradigm Shift' or 'Regime Change'

While capital's discourse of a low carbon economy emphasizes growth, competitiveness and efficiency, the labour movement agrees on this notion of a 'just transition'. However a point of contention among unionists involves the substantive content in this notion of a 'just transition'.

Two broad approaches to this notion of a 'just transition' may be identified:

i. The *minimalist position* emphasizes shallow, reformist change with green jobs, social protection, retraining and consultation. The emphasis is defensive and shows a preocupation with protecting the interest of vulnerable workers.

ii. An alternative notion of a just transition involves transformative change; an alternative growth path and new ways of producing and consuming.

The difference is clear in comparing two statements: first the 'Cancun agreements' formulated at COP 16 in 2010. A just transition means ensuring '…the importance of avoiding or minimizing negative impacts of response measures on social and economic sectors, promoting a just transition of the workforce, creating decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities and strategies and contributing to building new capacity for both production and service related jobs in all sectors,

promoting economic growth and sustainable development'. The second statement comes from SAMU's response to the National Climate Change Response Green Paper, February 2011: 'Tackling greenhouse gas emissions is not just a technical or technological problem. It requires a fundamental economic and social transformation to substantially change current patterns of production and consumption'.

Whereas the ITUC speaks of a 'paradigm shift', some SAMU activists speak of 'regime change. In the COSATU policy framework the explanation of a just transition reads: 'The evidence suggests that the transition to a low carbon economy will potentially create more jobs than it will lose. But we have to campaign for protection and support for workers whose jobs or livelihoods might be threatened by the transition. If we do not do that, then these workers will resist the transition. We also have to ensure that the development of new, green industries does not become an excuse for lowering wages and social benefits. New environmentally-friendly jobs provide an opportunity to redress many of the gender imbalances in employment and skills. The combination of these interventions is what we mean by a just transition'.

The Policy Framework goes on to say, 'The Just Transition is a concept that COSATU has supported in the global engagements on climate change that have been led by the ITUC. The basic demands of a Just Transition are:

- Investment in environmentally friendly activities that create decent jobs that are paid at living wages, that meet standards of health and safety, that promote gender equity and that are secure
- The putting in place of comprehensive social protections (pensions, unemployment insurance etc.) in order to protect the most vulnerable
- The conducting of research into the impacts of climate change on employment and livelihoods in order to better inform social policies
- Skills development and retraining of workers to ensure that they can be part of the new low-carbon development model.

The question is: are these necessary but sufficient conditions for a just transition? The framework goes on to say, 'As COSATU we need to ensure that the concept of a just transition is developed further to fully incorporate our commitment to a fundamentally transformed society'.

Conclusion

David Harvey writes, 'While nothing is certain, it could be that where we are now is only the beginning of a prolonged shake-out in which the question of grand and far-reaching alternatives will gradually bubble up to the surface in one part of the world or another' (Harvey 2010: 225).

In such a 'shake-out' a transformative understanding of a 'just transition to a low carbon economy' could contain the embryo of a very different social order, marked by:

- the collective, democratic control of production
- the mass roll out of renewable energy which could mean decentralized energy with much greater potential for community control
- the localization of food production in the shift from carbon-intensive industrial agriculture to agro-ecology, which could promote not only co-operatives and more communal living, but also a more direct sense of connection to nature
- the reduction of consumption, which could mean the simplification of middle class lifestyles, with reduced waste, extravagance and ostentation
- the shift to public transport which could reduce the reliance on private motor cars as symbols of power and freedom
- more sharing of resources which could mean more collective social forms, which could break the individualism that is a mark of neo-liberal capitalism
- the shift towards a more appreciative use of natural resources, which could reduce the alienation from nature of many urban inhabitants
- the spreading of values of sharing, simplicity, solidarity and more mindful living

Implicit in such a vision is the notion of a 'just transition to a low carbon economy' as potentially promoting a new kind of socialism which is democratic, ethical and ecological.

No serious observer now denies the severity of the environmental crisis, 'but it is still not widely recognized as a capitalist crisis, that is a crisis arising from and perpetuated by the rule of capital, and hence incapable of resolution within the capitalist framework' (Wallis 2010: 32). Thus Harvey insists on the 'absolute necessity' for a coherent, anti-capitalist revolutionary movement' (Harvey 2010: 228). In his view, 'While openings exist towards some alternative social order, no one really knows where or what it is…a global anti-capitalist movement is unlikely to emerge without some animating vision of what is to be done and why. A double blockage exists: the lack of an alternative vision prevents the formation of an oppositional movement, while the absence of such a movement precludes the articulation of an alternative' (Harvey 2010: 227).

This 'double blockage' is illustrated by the notion that our choices are limited to suicide or green capitalism. Fortunately in South Africa a third alternative – ecosocialism – is being debated. The key insights here are that an ecologically sustainable capitalism is an oxymoron and that 'an ethical, non-exploitative and socially just capitalism that redounds to the benefit of all is impossible. It contradicts the very nature of what capital is' (Harvey 2010: 239).

Debating alternatives means that trade unions have to go beyond the nation and beyond the workplace. The immediate tasks are: firstly to re-emphasize and redefine the core value of the labor movement – solidarity – which involves struggling against individualism

and what Leibowitz calls 'the infection of self-interest' promoted by marketized social relations (Leibowitz 2010: 144).

Secondly, we need to develop a vision of an alternative social order, to be clear about the kind of future society we want to see. As Lebowitz writes, 'if we don't know where we want to go, no path will take us there' (Leibowitz 2010: 7). 'The deepest shadow that hangs over us is neither terror, nor environmental collapse, nor global recession. It is the internalized fatalism that holds there is no possible alternative to capital's world order' (Kelly and Malone 2006: 116). Giving substantive content to the notion of a' Just Transition to a Low Carbon Economy' could be a step towards formulating such an alternative.

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