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# Trade unions must join the fight against climate change

Tuesday 25 September 2012, by [ANGUS Ian](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2011).

**Ian Angus, editor of Climate and Capitalism, is currently in Australia to speak at the Climate Change Social Change conference in Melbourne, September 30 - October 3.**

**During his pre-conference speaking tour, he was invited to address several meetings of trades union members. The following is a lightly edited transcript of the opening comments he made at union meetings in Melbourne and Geelong.**

*"If we leave this issue to the bosses, to the corporations and politicians who profit from the existing system, the changes will be inadequate - and they will put the entire burden on working people."*

Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

This week, in Canada, hundreds of people gathered on Parliament Hill, in Ottawa, to support a civil disobedience action against the environmental crime known as the Alberta Tar Sands, and the related Keystone XL pipeline.

The action was supported by the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union, the National Union of Public and General Employees, the Indigenous Environmental Movement, Greenpeace, the Council of Canadians and other groups.

One of the first of more than a hundred people arrested for crossing the police barrier was Dave Coles, president of the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union.

This is just one example of the participation of trade unionists around the world in the fight against global warming. I'd like to start off our discussion today with some comments on why a growing number of working people are coming to see global warming as a trade union issue.

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A few weeks ago, a headline in the *New York Times* read, "Even Marked Up, Luxury Goods Fly Off Shelves."

The article was about the shopping habits of the very rich, in the midst of the Great Recession, at a time when official unemployment in the U.S. is over 9%, and real unemployment is at least twice that high. Here are some excerpts:

*"Nordstrom has a waiting list for a Chanel sequined tweed coat with a \$9,010 price.*

*Neiman Marcus has sold out in almost every size of Christian Louboutin "Bianca" platform pumps, at \$775 a pair.*

Mercedes-Benz said it sold more cars last month in the United States than it had in any July in five years. ...

Tiffany's first-quarter sales were up 20 percent to \$761 million.

Last week LVMH, which owns expensive brands like Louis Vuitton and Givenchy, reported sales growth in the first half of 2011 of 13 percent to 10.3 billion euros, or \$14.9 billion. ...

BMW this week said it more than doubled its quarterly profit from a year ago as sales rose 16.5 percent; Porsche said its first-half profit rose 59 percent; and Mercedes-Benz said July sales of its high-end S-Class sedans — some of which cost more than \$200,000 — jumped nearly 14 percent in the United States."

The article notes that while this is going on, Wal-Mart, the largest retailer in the U.S., has started selling toilet paper one roll at a time, because many customers cannot afford the usual multi-roll packages.

For me, that *New York Times* article calls to mind a vitally important word that is missing from almost all of the hundreds of books that have been written about global warming and the global environmental crisis.

The word is *class*.

In the world's richest country, a handful of people buy nine thousand dollar coats and two hundred thousand dollar cars, while millions can't afford toilet paper.

That's a sign of *the deep class divide* that separates rich from poor, powerful from powerless, exploiters from exploited, bosses from working people.

- The richest 5% of Americans own more than everyone else in the U.S. combined.
- Here in Australia, eleven very rich individuals own more than the country's 800,000 poorest households combined.
- The 147 richest people in the world have total wealth equal to the total annual income of half of the world's entire population.

And yet one of the most common themes in articles about the environmental crisis is that WE are all in this together, WE are all responsible for destroying the earth.

You know, whenever someone says "we are all in this together," you can be sure that they want you to suffer and pay for a problem that someone else caused. And that's the case today with global warming.

The huge BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico occurred while Simon Butler and I were writing our new book, *Too Many People?* [\[1\]](#)

Almost immediately there were articles in major newspapers claiming that WE were responsible for the disaster, because WE love cars and WE are addicted to oil.

We couldn't resist paraphrasing one of Bob Dylan's early songs - "No, No, No, It ain't WE, babe."

Global warming and environmental destruction are not caused by working people.

They are caused by the rich, both as super-consumers and, even more importantly, through their control of the corporations that produce the immense majority of greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution.

Stephen Pacala, director of the Princeton Environmental Institute, puts it this way

- The 3 billion poorest people ... emit essentially nothing.
- In contrast, the rich are really spectacular emitters ....
- The top 500 million people [about 8 percent of humanity] emit half the greenhouse emissions.
- These people are really rich by global standards.
- Every single one of them earns more than the average American ...

And yet many environmentalists insist that working people are the cause of global warming, that the solution is for us to lower our living standards, give up our cars, and pay carbon taxes.

In reality, individual activity isn't driving climate change, and changes in individual behavior – however morally appropriate – will not save the world.

Let me illustrate this with an example from my home country.

75% of the electricity produced in Alberta, the third largest Canadian province, comes from five coal-fired plants.

Those five plants together produce more greenhouse gas emissions every year *than four million automobiles*.

If those plants were replaced by renewable energy sources – if Alberta implemented the Beyond Zero Emissions plan that has been recommended in Australia – Alberta's total emissions would drop dramatically.

And what's more, the emissions attributed to individuals and households would fall dramatically, because they would be getting their electricity from green sources.

But if the electricity business continues as usual, individuals and families in Alberta can not possibly live carbon-free lives.

Alberta is also the site of what has been called the biggest ecological crime in history, the Tar Sands.

In addition to physically destroying an area twice as large as Tasmania, poisoning the land and the Athabaska River, this project generates more than 3 times as much greenhouse gas per barrel as conventional oil.

Our Conservative federal government, which isn't given to pro-environmental exaggeration, estimates that by 2020 the Tar Sands will produce more greenhouse gases than every car and truck in all of Canada.

So long as the Tar Sands projects exist, trying to solve global warming by persuading individual drivers to ride bicycles is like fighting cancer by getting a haircut.

It may make some cosmetic difference, but it leaves the disease untouched.

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I'm not saying that we shouldn't try to live greener lives. Of course we should. But we must understand that while there are things that individuals can do, *global warming is a social problem, and it can only be solved by social change.*

To prevent disaster, we need a new industrial revolution, a new energy revolution. We need to change what we make and how we make it.

Entire industries need to be eliminated and others need to be transformed.

If the necessary economic and social changes are not made, our lives, and even more our children's lives, will be much harder, much poorer, than they are today.

Our grandchildren may not have an inhabitable world to grow up in.

And that means that global warming is a trade union issue. It is an issue that directly affects working people, and it can only be stopped if the workers' organizations join and lead the fight to end it.

If we leave this issue to the bosses, to the corporations and politicians who profit from the existing system, the changes will be inadequate – and they will put the entire burden on working people.

The rich will reap the profits, they'll continue to live in gated communities and air conditioned mansions, while we pay the price.

The trade union movement must take this challenge on – or working people will be the victims of climate change.

One powerful example is in Britain, where trade unionists in the climate change movement are promoting a call for One Million Climate Jobs [\[2\]](#). Not just loosely-defined “green jobs” that clean up the mess while leaving the causes untouched, but specifically climate jobs.

- Jobs building new energy sources and a new energy grid.
- Jobs retrofitting homes and offices for energy efficiency.
- Jobs expanding public transport and railroads.
- And more

In their document calling for One Million Climate Jobs they have documented just what has to be done, and what it will cost. They have shown that it is possible, and affordable, and essential.

This campaign takes the concept of a “just transition” into new territory – not just protecting current income, but actually fighting for a union-initiated transition to a new kind of economy.

The campaign is supported by the Public and Commercial Services Union, the University and College Union, the Communication Workers Union and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association.

The pamphlet describing their plan is available online (PDF) [\[3\]](#) – I encourage you to read and circulate it.

It's a realistic and practical plan – but it won't happen unless working people fight for it.

I won't presume to tell you what tactics or demands are appropriate in Australia- you know your situation far better than I. But I will say that the Green Bans of the 1970s were an inspiring example and precedent for green left labor activists around the world.

Whether or not those specific tactics are appropriate today, the simple fact that you carried out that inspiring campaign convinces me that trade unions in Australia can be leaders of the global fight against environmental destruction, that you understand that climate change is a trade union issue and will act accordingly.

As the old song *Solidarity Forever* says, ***there can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun*** .

If we unite and mobilize that power, we can save the world.

Thank you.

**Ian Angus**

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**P.S.**

\* <http://climateandcapitalism.com/2011/09/29/trade-unionists-must-unite-against-climate-change/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://astore.amazon.com/climaandcapit-20/detail/1608461408>

[2] <http://www.climate-change-jobs.org/>

[3] [http://www.climate-change-jobs.org/sites/default/files/1MillionClimateJobs\\_2010.PDF](http://www.climate-change-jobs.org/sites/default/files/1MillionClimateJobs_2010.PDF)