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**The perils and promise of green capitalism for labour.**

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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 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 shifting towards 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’ (Fine, 2010).

Very recently the South African labour movement has expressed its commitment to a ‘*just transition*’. However this paper argues that this is contentious with very different understandings of the scale and nature of the changes involved. A just transition to a low carbon economy could be defensive and involve demands for shallow change focused on protecting vulnerable workers, or alternatively for deep, transformative change involving demands for 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 create 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 emphasises solidarity as involving ‘mutuality despite difference’ based on a sense of interdependence (Hyman, 2011: 26). He concludes that ‘the challenge is to reconceptualise solidarity in ways which encompass the local, the national... 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).

This paper suggests that, most clearly in its warnings of the threat to human survival, the discourse of climate change could be contributing to such a process and even strengthen the embryonic global anti-capitalist movement. But the notion of a just transition could also be interpreted to mean shallow change and incorporation into 'green capitalism'

### **Green neo-liberal capitalism**

Capital's response to the ecological crisis is that the system can continue to expand by creating a new 'sustainable' or 'green capitalism', bringing the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction. The two pillars on which green capitalism rests are technological innovation and expanding markets while keeping the existing institutions of capitalism intact.

More specifically green capitalism involves:

- Profiting from the carbon trading regime enshrined in the Kyoto Protocols
- Appeals to nature (and even the crisis) as a marketing tool.
- Developing largely untested technology such as through Carbon Capture and Storage, which involves installing equipment that captures carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases and then pumping the gas underground.
- The development of new sources of energy such as solar, nuclear and wind hereby creating new markets which emphasize energy efficiency.
- Finally, the massive development of biofuels which diverts land from food production

Underlying all these strategies is the broad process of commodification: the transformation of nature and all social relations into economic relations, subordinated to the logic of the market and the imperatives of profit.

However, the notion of 'green or sustainable capitalism' is being subjected to growing criticism. (Harris-White in Panitch and Leys, 2006; Kovel, 2001; Foster, 2009). These critiques are rooted in the understanding that *capital's logic of accumulation* is destroying the ecological conditions which sustain life.

### **The South African government response to climate change**

The South African government's climate change policy is rooted in this green neo-liberalism. It is marked by a prioritization of profit generation, a reliance on market mechanisms (especially the promotion of carbon trading such as the CDM (clean development mechanisms) and technological innovation in expensive, high-risk schemes such as Carbon Capture and Storage and nuclear energy. The latter is low carbon only at the point of generation. The rest of the production chain is both energy and carbon intensive, costs are excessive, safety cannot be guaranteed and nowhere has a safe storage option for high level nuclear waste been identified. Official policy documents demonstrate an incoherence and aspirations towards reducing carbon emissions are contradicted by government practices which involve massively expanded coal-fired and nuclear energy.

The parastatal Eskom is committed to building more coal-fired power stations, Medupi and Kusile. The World Bank's \$3.75 billion loan to Eskom to enable it to do this will increase the price of electricity for poor people, worsen our contribution to carbon emissions and climate change and allow continued subsidised supply of the world's cheapest electricity to large corporations, such as BHP Billiton, and the export of their profits abroad.

Ironically the government seems aware of the seriousness of the threat of climate change. For example the 2010 National Climate Change Response Green Paper warns that if international action does not limit the average global temperature increases to below at least 2 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels, "the potential impacts on South Africa in the medium to long-term are significant and potentially catastrophic". Also it warns that "after 2050 warming is projected to reach around 3 – 4 degrees C along the coast, and 6 -7 degrees C in the interior. With these kinds of temperature increases, life as we know it, will change completely".

In 2010 South Africa's carbon emissions were about 400 million tons, which amounts to about 1.5% of the global total. In 2009 at COP 15 in Copenhagen the government made voluntary commitments to a 'Peak, Plateau and Decline' (PPD) trajectory. The 'decline' means "South Africa reiterates that it will take nationally appropriate mitigation action to enable a 34% deviation below the 'Business as Usual' emissions growth trajectory by 2020 and a 42% deviation below .. by 2025" (DEA, 2010::2). Much publicity has been given to this commitment, but less attention has been given to how these reductions will be made or to the condition stipulated : that an international agreement is reached and that the financing, and technology necessary to achieve this reduction is provided by the international community. Two economists have concluded that, "the post 2025 plateau and decline is at least economically infeasible if not impossible within the current economic structure " (Trollop and Tyler, 2011:28).

Other policy documents, such as the New Growth Path released in October 2010, do not mention the Copenhagen pledge, nor the PPD , focusing on the new 'Green Economy' as one of six drivers of employment. It targets 300,000 additional direct jobs by 2020 with 80,000 in manufacturing and the rest in construction, operations and maintenance of new environmentally friendly infrastructure. The potential for job creation rises to well over 400,000 by 2030." (NGP Framework, 2010:13). While the New Growth Path Framework identifies the 'green economy' as important, it does not define it or specify what constitutes it

IPAP identifies the Green Economy as a "major new thrust for the South African economy which presents multiple opportunities to create jobs and value –adding industries. (DTI, 2011:17). It also acknowledges that "increasing energy costs pose a major threat to manufacturing, rendering our historical, resource-intensive, processing-based industrial path unviable in the future". (DTI, 2011:97). However "these statements are undermined by the compartmentalisation of the 'Green Economy' as something separate and therefore different or additional to a mainstream future South African economy" (Trollop and Tyler, 2011:12).

The Integrated Resource Plan (IRP2 2010) introduced some renewable energy into the supply mix but beyond Medupi and Kusile the IRP plans on 2 or 3 major new coal plants between 2014 and 2030, and a ‘fleet’ of six new nuclear power plants to be build by 2030. Trollop and Tyler conclude that “The IRP does not support the transition to a low energy intensive economy as are required by mitigation policy” (Trollop and Tyler, 2011:18).

Overall South Africa’s commitments to reducing carbon emissions are vague and insubstantial. The real commitment is to economic growth. As David Hallows comments, “...government cannot face up to what it sees coming because it remains wedded to the dominant interests of the mineral-energy complex. It remains locked in a view of the world in which economic growth constitutes the central organizing principle of development. This is not because growth is needed to alleviate poverty but because it is needed to reproduce capital... Changing the system is necessary because capitalism is not compatible with addressing climate change” (Hallows, SDCEA, 2011:18). This is one of the key themes of the emerging climate justice movement in South Africa.

### **The civil society response: the climate justice movement**

The notion of climate justice is supported by a widespread global civil society movement launched in 2007 at the Bali negotiations. The movement has been steadily growing, since the network Climate Justice Now (CJN) was formed from different strands in the women’s, environmental and democratic popular movements from the Global South, like Via Campesina and Jubilee South. It is an alternative to the global coalition of well funded environmental foundations and NGOs who often lack democratic accountability, and tend to ‘ventriloquise’ on behalf of grassroots communities.

The focus is on ‘Climate justice’ which is stressed in both global and local terms. Globally justice is a strong theme among activists who claim that a wide range of activities contribute to an ecological debt owed to countries in the global south: the extraction of natural resources, unequal terms of trade, degradation of land and soil for export crops, loss of biodiversity and so on. Locally it is demonstrated that it is the poor and the powerless who are most negatively affected by pollution and resource depletion and will bear the brunt of climate change.

In South Africa this emphasis translates into a campaigning focus on issues such as jobs and food prices which resonate with working class people. The consequence is that the movement has a different social base to that of the environmental struggles of the past. Dominated by white, middle-class supporters these were largely focused on the conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas to the neglect of social needs. (Cock, 2006). The social base of the climate justice movement includes organized labour, unemployed people and, according to Standing, has a special appeal to what he terms the ‘precariat’ (i) “Most informed people recognize the frightening ecological threat posed by global warming, pollution and the disappearance of species. Yet much of the elite (the absurdly rich global citizens) and upper parts of the salariat (those in secure, stable, full-time employment) do not really care. Their affluence

and connections can ensure they are not touched. .. It is the precariat that is naturally the green class in arguing for a more egalitarian society in which sharing and reproductive, resource-conserving activities are prioritized.” (Standing, 2011:179). There is no empirical evidence to support this claim of a ‘natural green class’ emerging. Nor does Standing consider how the ecological crisis is deepening insecurities among all classes and creating a ‘risk society’. (Beck, 2001).

At present in South Africa the emerging climate justice movement is composed of very disparate elements from civil society. The ideological content of the movement includes quite widely diverse priorities, goals and concerns from establishing a socialist alternative, to food security or protecting biodiversity. On the other hand, there is the mobilizing power of the justice frame. People everywhere are all too aware of the injustices (both within and between nations) embedded in both the causes and the consequences of climate change. In *Power in Movement*, Tarrow argues that injustice and emotionality are central to framing contention. Collective emotions are triggered by an injustice frame, which highlights and morally condemns human suffering, contending that such suffering is not inevitable, “not written in the stars”(Tarrow,1998:111).

Several analysts have stressed the unifying potential of this emerging climate justice movement in South Africa. According to Patrick Bond, “..the CJ organisations and networks offer great potential to fuse issue-specific progressive environmental and social activists, many of which have strong roots in oppressed communities” (Bond, 2010:3).

The director of Greenpeace has also emphasized the importance of unity. According to Kumi Naidoo “as the host of COP 17 the government of South Africa has a great opportunity to represent Africa who will be hardest hit by climate change. We must come together and speak with one voice...Having different marches at the World Summit on Sustainable Development meant we let South Africa down”. (Kumi Naidoo Uppsala interview 13.4.2011)

To generate this unity representatives from 80 different organizations, representing a broad spectrum of civil society, including trade unionists, came together in Durban in January 2011 to form a coordinating committee.

The grouping included many different ‘shades of green’ and the participating organizations stated different objectives. (ii) The meeting has been described as “fraught’ with competing claims and interests. One informant described the fault line as “deep political differences between liberal and socialist approaches” .There were elements of opportunism with some organizations clearly stating that they “want to get organisational gains from the Cop17 process.” Since then the committee has focused on public education, organising a mass march on the global day of action and providing an alternative space in Durban for civil society organizations.

The unity on the issue seems somewhat fragile and unstable. The immediate source of contention is the reliance on market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions, particularly the Clean Development Mechanism(CDM) which enables a developed country to invest in an emission

reduction project in another country, and the Carbon Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).(iii) What these ‘flexibility mechanisms’ mean is that corporations are able to buy the right to pollute. The climate scientist James Hansen, Director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies has likened these measures to the indulgences that the Catholic Church sold in the Middle Ages: “The bishops collected lots of money and the sinners got redemption. Both parties liked that arrangement despite its absurdity. That is exactly what is happening” (Goldenberg, 2009).ETS has also been compared to paying someone to diet for you. Carbon trading has failed to reduce carbon emissions but has proved to be extremely profitable for many multinational corporations. It is another manifestation of ‘green capitalism’ which is aimed at making profits from climate change, not solving it. Another contentious issue is the role of the World Bank in climate financing. (iv)

These issues are embedded in the main fault line in the civil society organizations involved in climate change: those organizations with a reform and those with a transformative agenda. The question is whether and to what extent the necessary changes are possible within the current economic system. All the organisations involved emphasize the need for change towards the goal of a low carbon economy but differ on the scale of change involved and the means of reaching it. Those organizations with a reform agenda accept market based solutions such as carbon trading, place a heavy reliance on technologies such as Carbon Capture and Storage and view the UNFCCC process and the South African government’s negotiating position in positive terms. This approach is the object of intense criticism by those organizations with a transformative agenda who stress that market based solutions such as carbon trading are one way in which capital is attempting to appropriate the crisis and make climate change a site of capital accumulation. They are skeptical of expensive and untested technologies such as carbon capture and storage and there is a strong emphasis on the cause of the climate crisis as the expansionist logic of the capitalist system.

Provisional mapping of the climate change terrain indicates a loose grouping around a few key nodes such as Earthlife Africa which is now the lead organisation in South Africa of the international alliance Climate Justice Now and supports a transformative agenda. The alliance Climate Justice Now South Africa ( CJNSA) explicitly rejects “the false solutions based on market mechanisms such as the CDM, and REDD “( Statement 14.6.2011) In the CJNSA submission on the Integrated Resource Plan 2011 it is stated, “The IRP displays the continued power of the corporations at the centre of the minerals-energy complex to shape development to their own interests. For the people of South Africa and the environment, it is catastrophic.”

In a different CJN position paper it is stated, “Capitalism is not compatible with addressing climate change. It requires never ending economic growth for its survival. Growth has brought unprecedented wealth to the owners of capital, prosperity to the world’s middle classes and untold misery to the majority of people particularly in the global South. Capitalism plunders the resources of the earth and of the people. It is the driving force behind ecological disruption on all scales from the local to the global. Climate change is the ultimate symptom of this renting of the earth system” Some elements among these anti-capitalist social forces also support the ‘deep ecology perspective’ enshrined in the Cochabamba People’s Agreement which emerged from

Bolivia in 2009. This does not only stresses the expansionist logic of the capitalist system as the main source of climate change, but highlights the importance of “living in harmony with nature”.. ‘the rights of mother earth’(v).

A key node in an alternative approach centers on the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) an international NGO which supports both carbon trading, the role of the World Bank in mitigation funding and the South African government negotiating position, in a reform agenda. There is an optimism that the environmentally destructive capitalist activities can be corrected through political action within the system, actions such as carbon trading, taxes, technological innovation, energy efficiency, and incentives to capital. The trust is on reforming or greening the present form of ‘suicide capitalism’.

This faultline is reflected in the labour movement’s response to climate change.

### **Labour ‘s response to climate change.**

Contention focuses on four issues:

- (i) the substantive content of a ‘just transition’
- (ii) the use of market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions
- (iii) Whether it is *capital’s logic of accumulation* that is causing climate change and destroying the ecological conditions which sustain life.
- (iv) the reliance on new technology to reduce carbon emissions

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 emphasis on the creation of ‘green’ or ‘climate jobs’ challenges the false dichotomy which portrays labour-environmental relations as a trade-off between jobs and the environment. Green jobs are at the centre of global debates on the transition to what is variously termed ‘a low carbon economy’ or a ‘green economy’. The common element is the need for a transition to a new energy regime. However there is ambiguity on the meaning of these terms.

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. Others argue for a broader approach which is not limited to attempts to move away from a reliance on fossils fuels and build a low-carbon economy, but includes attempts to provide a more sustainable and appreciative use of natural resources. Specifically,

but not exclusively, this includes jobs that help to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, reduce energy, materials, and water consumption through high-efficiency strategies; de-carbonise the economy; and minimise or altogether avoid the generation of all forms of waste and pollution.

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 jobs 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) Firstly 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 27.7.2011). Questioned on the calculation that urban agriculture in Gauteng could generate almost half a million jobs, the source admitted that the figure was “an educated thumbsuck” (Interview, Johannesburg 3.12.2011)

(ii) Secondly in the debate on creating a green economy, insufficient attention has been paid on 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. Linking them through the demand for decent, green jobs could strengthen debates in the policy discourse around how to address the environmental crisis (particularly climate change) in a way that contributes to job creation and poverty alleviation.

(iii) Thirdly insufficient attention has been paid to job losses. Some employment will be substituted, as in shifting from landfilling and waste incineration to recycling. Certain jobs will be eliminated, as in the production of elaborate packaging materials. Many existing jobs for categories such as plumbers, electricians, metal and construction workers will necessitate re-training. A transition to clean energy will create far more jobs than it would eliminate. However the fact that some people get new jobs provides little comfort for the people and communities who could lose theirs, jobs in coal fired power plants for example. Therefore the international trade union movement supports a ‘just transition’ that protects working people. This is minimally emphasizes protection and the need to develop programs for workers who lose their jobs because of climate protection policies.

(iv) Lastly the question must be confronted: are green jobs one component of a new green capitalism which is trying to avoid fundamental change through an emphasis on expanding markets and new technologies. 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. 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 paper 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.

A global alliance of labor and environmental activists could become a significant source of counter power. For example in 2009 in South Africa two environmental justice organisations *Earthlife Africa* (Johannesburg) and *Groundwork* mobilized opposition to the World Bank’s \$3.75 billion loan to Eskom to build more coal –fired power stations. They made connections between organizations and grassroots communities in the Global North and South to mobilize opposition to the loan. Within three months more than two hundred organisations around the world (including some trade unions) were mobilized to endorse a critique of the loan. *Earthlife* argued that ‘this loan is not about poor people or jobs or even the climate, but is benefitting vested interests’.(Adam et al, 2010:12) They pointed out that this will increase the price of electricity for poor people and worsen South Africa’s contribution to carbon emissions and climate change. While opposition to the loan was not ultimately successful , *Earthlife* officer, Tristan Taylor maintains that ‘future World Bank funding for coal is far less likely’.

### **The International Trade Union Response**

Trade unions have participated in the UNFCCC since its inception, under the umbrella of the ITUC which represents 170million workers through its affiliated organizations in 157 countries. The UNFCCC has included rising numbers of trade unionists, though mostly from the developed countries.

In addressing climate change, the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC ) have advocated a ‘just transition’. Their argument is that workers and affected communities need adequate social protection and access to new opportunities. This implies new labour market policies, income protection, retraining, awareness and capacity building. At the 2010 COP 16 meeting held in Cancun, Mexico, organized labour successfully lobbied for the inclusion of the concept of a ‘just transition’ into the UNFCCC negotiations.

However while the concept of a ‘Just Transition’ is central to ITUC policy there are many outstanding questions. In their report entitled, *Equity, Justice and solidarity in the fight against*

*climate change* (2009) the need is stressed “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)

Discussing a new development paradigm on the way to the Cop17 meeting, the Rio + 20 summit and beyond, at the Madrid Dialogue , a gathering of trade union leaders from around the world to discuss a new low carbon development paradigm in April 2011, the Spanish minister of the environment stressed that “the social and environmental agenda should be indissolubly joined in order for a just transition to be produced towards a new model of growth”. Zwelinzima Vavi, the General Secretary of COSATU said, “The current economic model is heading us towards more crises, unemployment and environmental degradation. ..If we are serious about addressing the vulnerability of poor workers and communities, Rio+20 needs to shift from piecemeal commitments and deliver a universal social protection floor, which will ensure dignified livelihoods for all. The climate negotiations in Durban must support this effort through the protection of the poorest from a climate perspective: with ambition in terms of emission reductions and climate finance.” He also said, ”we will not support any form of capital accumulation that breeds inequalities – even if those forms of capital accumulation are green’. (Vavi,2011:2).

Support for a green economy and green jobs was expressed at this gathering. For example, “ a green economy based on rights, sustainability principles and decent work can meet the challenge of our societies.... A just transition, such as the one unions are calling for, needs to be based on the transformation of all jobs into sustainable ones” said Ambet Yuson, the General Secretary of Building and Woodworkers International (BWI)

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 programmes” (UNEP,2008:66)

The emphasis is on “the need to involve workers in climate change decision making, to establish fair transitions and to protect the most vulnerable from necessary changes to be undertaken in the world of work”. (UNEP,2008:101)

The ILO has emphasized the need for a ‘just transition’ framework to ensure decent work remains central in the construction of a fairer, greener and more sustainable form of globalization.

The majority global trade union federations, led by the ITUC are committed to a social dialogue model of social change. Their definition of a Just Transition explicitly contains the phrase ‘social dialogue’. This contrasts with the minority WFTU proposals around climate change which frame the issue in a critique of capitalism. Its proposals are rooted in a commitment to class struggle

### **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. At its 2009 Congress COSATU decided to increase its research capacity on climate change and at the tenth national congress that “climate change is one of the greatest threats to our planet and our people”. It noted that” it is the working class, the poor and developing countries that will be adversely affected by climate change.” The Congress also noted that “unless the working class and its organizations take up the issue of climate change seriously, all the talk about ‘green jobs’ will amount to nothing except being another site of accumulation for capitalists.

The labour/civil society conference convened by COSATU in October 2010 included over 300 civil society organisations and resulted in a declaration which included a recognition of the ecological crisis. For example, “we need to move towards sustainable energy, to migrate the economy from one based on a coal to a low carbon or possibly carbon free economy. The renewable energy sector will grow, needing different skills and different locations. We have to make sure that we are in charge of this process and do not become the objects of it.”There are also references to ‘eco-agriculture’, a rejection of nuclear power, ‘zero-waste’ and “green jobs ‘. (Declaration of the Civil Society Conference held on 27 -28 October 2010,Boksburg).

In June 2011 the central committee of COSATU endorsed the million climate jobs campaign and “resolved at the 2011 meeting that “going forward, we should strengthen our participation and be more effective in the National Committee on Climate Change in order to influence government’s negotiating position in COP 17; that as COSATU we should continue to participate in the Civil Society (C17) which is responsible for co-ordinating civil society work around COP 17 and mobilize our members for the Global Day of Action on Saturday 3 December.”

Many trade unionists emphasize the links between the climate crisis and neo-liberal capitalism A document titled ‘Labour’s Initial Response to the National Climate Change Response Green Paper 2010’ dated 28.2.2011 and endorsed by COSATU, NACTU and FEDUSA , states that the “we are convinced that any efforts to address the problems of Climate Change that does not fundamentally challenge the system of global capitalist is bound not only to fail, but to generate new, larger and more dangerous threats to human beings and our planet. Climate Change .. is caused by the global private profit system of capitalism. 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”. However the implications of this claim need to be addressed.

Following discussion at a workshop in Durban in July 2011 on climate change the Central Executive Committee of COSATU meeting on 22 – 24 August 2011 and attended by National office bearers, representatives of the 20 affiliated unions and 9 provincial structures, adopted a Climate Change Policy Framework.

Fourteen principles were agreed on of which the most controversial were:

- \* 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
- \*We reject market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions
- \*Developed countries must pay their climate debt and the Green Climate Fund must be accountable.

The explanatory note on this point states, “.. the Fund should not be administered or dominated in any way by the World Bank..The World Bank has historically been part of the problem of climate change, not part of the solution. It continues to fund massive fossil fuel projects in at least seven different countries.

- \*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 the notion of a ‘just transition’. To some it involves shallow change focused on protecting the sectors of the workforce most vulnerable to mitigation strategies, while to others it requires deep, transformative change to ensure both sustainability and justice in the move to a low carbon economy. For example, whereas the ITC speaks of a ‘paradigm shift’, some activists of the COSATU affiliate SAMWU, speak of regime change.

It is unclear how much priority will be given to climate change in the context of the many issues and planned campaigns the labour movement in South Africa is addressing – issues such as labour brokers, the living wage campaign and so on. A recent small scale survey of COSATU affiliates shop stewards revealed that at least 10% of the respondents were unclear about the nature of climate change, its causes and consequences, and almost a quarter (23%) did not know

what a ‘just transition’ meant. Furthermore different affiliates will react differently to climate change policies, especially those directly threatened with job loss. The notion of a ‘just transition’ could become an empty slogan.

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 preoccupation 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 126 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 SAMWU’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”

A very influential and widely circulated document, *Climate Change. Its Consequences on Employment and Trade Union Action. A training manual for workers and trade unions by sustainlabour*. States, “While trade unions need to accept that changes in some sectors are necessary, they need to propose measures that prevent workers from bearing the burden of these transitions”. (sustainlabour, 2008:77). This protectionist discourse contrasts strongly with a transformative notion of workers carrying us forward into a completely new energy regime

A similarly weak notion is evident in the ILO and UNEP report of 2011 *Towards a Green Economy: pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication* states, “The structural transformation ..may also cause the contraction of sectors and enterprises which are incompatible with long term sustainable development. The management of this change needs to be fair and must ensure sufficient protection and access to alternatives for those negatively affected.”

In the COSATU policy framework endorsed by the CEC 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.”

It 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 for 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 difference between the minimalist and the transformative accounts of a just transition to a low carbon economy become sharper if we consider the impact of climate change in two areas that are of crucial importance to working people: food and energy.

### **(i)Climate change and food production**

Half of all South African households suffer from ‘food insecurity’, and 1 in every four children under the age of six is showing signs of stunted growth. This will increase because climate change threatens the availability of food. Future food production will lack cheap energy, abundant water or a stable climate. Climate change means more extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods and less predictable rainfall. In Sub-Saharan Africa arid areas will increase to 90 million hectares. In Southern Africa it is estimated that yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50% by 2020. The production of the main ingredient of bread – wheat - could disappear from Africa and there will be a decrease in the amount of maize under cultivation

One response is to argue that we need to increase local food production in ways that could create new ‘green’ jobs while strengthening food security. For example, it has been estimated that to meet the fresh produce requirements of the Gauteng population, 26, 672 hectares need to be cultivated which could mean 444,538 new direct jobs.(Spencer et al, 2010:12). But should civil society also be demonstrating that conventional agriculture increases climate change through its dependence on non-renewable fossil fuel energy in transport, fertilizers and pesticides and so on. This suggests that civil society should struggle for more than ‘green jobs’, for the right of people to sufficient, healthy food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. This involves replacing the present system of industrialized agriculture with ‘food sovereignty’. This

means re-organizing food production and consumption away from profit driven corporations to prioritize local needs, knowledge and small farmers.

This notion of ‘food sovereignty’ is not mentioned in the training manual, *Climate Change, its Consequences on Employment and Trade Union Action (2008)* produced by the International Labour Foundation for Sustainable Development (sustainlabour) for the United Nations Environment Programme. Furthermore this widely distributed document advocates the development of biofuels in developing countries. (UNEP,2008:39)which divert land from crop production.

## **(ii) Climate change and energy**

A quarter of South African households suffer from energy poverty. They are denied access to electricity either due to the lack of infrastructure or unaffordable pre-paid meters. They have to rely on dangerous paraffin stoves and candles, or the time consuming collection of firewood. At the same time 90% of our electricity is generated through burning coal which means that it is highly polluting. Justice demands that they have access to energy; sustainability demands that this should be safe and renewable energy.

Studies have shown that 50% of all electricity from clean, renewable resources is possible by 2030 and could provide over a million new jobs.(Worthington and Tyler, 2010). There is also a strong argument for the creation of ‘green jobs’ in labour intensive renewable energy, such as solar powered water geysers. These are capable of saving 40% of domestic electricity costs and would be of great benefit to poor households It has been claimed that our solar potential is the highest in the world and ‘Concentrated Solar Power’ could create 4,000 new jobs a year in Gauteng alone. (Spencer et al, 2010:15). The question is whether civil society should struggle for more than these green jobs; for a different energy regime that does not reflect the interests of capital (in coal and nuclear energy) and that the core problem is neo-liberal capitalism.

These questions regarding food and energy sovereignty are relevant because it is clear that the South African government is driven by vested interests. It perpetuates market-led economic growth models which benefit large corporations at the expense of job creation and the social needs of the majority. It will not solve the problem of climate change which threatens us all. Neither will ‘green capitalism.’

## **Conclusion**

‘No serious observer now denies the severity of the environmental crisis, but it is still not widely recognised 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). Our challenge is not only to demonstrate this relation, but to strengthen the global anti-capitalist movement. We can best do so by promoting the notion of a ‘just transition to a low

carbon economy’ as potentially containing the embryo of a new kind of socialism which is democratic, ethical and ecological.

A transformative understanding of a ‘just transition to a low carbon economy’ could even contain the embryo of a very different social order. For example,

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

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)

Harvey insists on the ‘absolute necessity’ for a coherent, anti-capitalist revolutionary movement’ (Harvey, 2010:228). ‘The central problem is that in aggregate there is no resolute and sufficiently unified anti-capitalist movement that can adequately challenge the reproduction of the capitalist class and the perpetuation of its power on the world stage. Neither is there any obvious way to attack the bastions of privilege for capitalist elites or to curb their inordinate money power and military might... 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 claim that, our choices are limited to suicide or green capitalism. Fortunately in South Africa is a third alternative – ecosocialism –is being promoted by a new political grouping, the Democratic Left Forum. 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 the individualism and what Leibowitz calls 'the infection of self-interest' promoted by marketised social relations.(Leibowitz, 2010:144). It is also necessary to challenge the notion that trade unions have become largely obsolete in a globalising world. This argument surfaces in different, debilitating forms such as the cynicism of Standing (2009,2011), who sees a class fragmentation (involving a new elite and a growing 'precariat') as displacing organized labour.

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 Leibowitz 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.

## FOOTNOTES

(i) This is a large and growing social category. "In many countries at least a quarter of the adult population is in the precariat.." (Standing, 2011:24) The precariat is characterised by insecure employment, minimal labour protection, no sense of secure occupational identity, few state entitlements.i.e. it includes both employed and unemployed people but all experience a mix of rising anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. They constitute "... a growing mass of people.. in situations that can only be described as alienated, anomic, anxious and prone to anger. The warning sign is political disengagement" (Standing, 2011:24).

(ii)Sklair distinguishes between "'Dry greens' believe in the manipulation of the market place through benign self regulation; 'shallow greens' criticize this reinforcing of the status quo and focus on community based reform, eco-auditing and environmentally benign consumerism; 'deep greens' reject the culture -ideology of consumerism and the whole global capitalist project".(Sklair, 1994; 24)

(iii)The Kyoto Protocol offers flexibility in the way countries reduce their carbon emissions. It defined three such 'flexibility mechanisms' which enable governments to reduce emissions in other countries. These are:

- (a) The Clean Development Mechanism. A developed country may invest in a emission reduction project in a developing country. This is very controversial but it is described by the UNEP as a "win-win strategy: the developed country counts these emissions reduction as if they were reduced in its own territory; the developing country receives clean technologies, which will enhance clean and sustainable development." (UNEP,2008:46)
- (b) Joint Implementation and
- (c) Emissions Trading. The Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) or 'Cap and Trade' as it is more popularly known, is the current cornerstone of European climate change

policy. This means that developed countries with emission reduction commitments can buy and sell emissions credits to and from other developed countries. Corporations having received emissions rights can sell those they have not used because they have reduced their emissions, or can buy emissions rights at market price if they did not reach their emission reduction target.

Another controversial market mechanism is REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) in developing countries. Halting deforestation is critical to reversing the increase in carbon emissions. However many argue that a market –based REDD only further commodifies nature and is not actually going to result in halting deforestation.

(iv) The appointment by the UNFCCC of the World Bank as interim trustee of the Green Climate Fund is particularly controversial. This fund, established by the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and renewed through the 2010 Cancun Agreement, promises that developed nations would mobilize jointly \$100 billion a year in long-term financing by 2020 to help developing countries adapt to climate change. In April this year over 90 NGOs protested that this turned climate change into a new arena of financial speculation. (Gerhardt, 2011:1)

(v) Deep ecology involves an ‘ ecological consciousness’. “This process involves becoming more aware of the actuality of rocks, wolves, trees and rivers – the cultivation of the insight that everything is connected” (Devall and Sessions, 1985:8). Recognising the connection implies a responsibility towards all living creatures.

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