

The role of labour in the fight against climate change

(including a case-study of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF))

Asbjørn Wahl

Chair of the ITF Working Group on Climate Change

Chair of the ITF Urban Transport Committee

Adviser at the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees

Director of the Norwegian Campaign for the Welfare State

Research Fellow at Parkland Institute, Edmonton, Canada

Introduction

The climate crisis is steadily coming closer. At the same time, we face a deepening economic crisis, as well as social and political crises. This creates an increasingly serious situation for the future of humanity.

However, given that the various crises have many of the same root causes, going to the core of our economic system, this can contribute to strengthening the mobilisation of social forces needed to break the current trend – in favour of a democratic and planned development of society.

Action to combat dramatic climate change will require major societal transformation. In other words, we have an all-out battle on our hands over how to organise society. Solutions to the climate crisis *do* exist. We have most of what is required in terms of technology, knowledge, and competence to avert a climate disaster. It is the power to translate words into action that will pose the greatest challenge.

Since economic growth and ruthless exploitation of natural resources are embedded parts of a capitalist economy – indeed, any capitalism without growth is a capitalism in crisis – a narrow focus on individual issues of environmental policy will not suffice. Nor will we be able to combat the climate crisis by making individual choices. A system critical approach is needed. We need democratic control of the economy. This means that we are not only faced with a threat, but also an opportunity – an opportunity, not just to prevent a climate catastrophe, but also to fight the economic and social crises which are currently eroding and threatening the living conditions of millions upon millions of people. In particular, this also provides us with a foundation upon which to build extensive social alliances in search of a different kind of society.

The role of the trade union movement

Thus, the fight against climate change is first and foremost a struggle for social power, a struggle in which the critical factor will be the balance of power between the dominant interest groups in society. In this struggle the trade union movement, or the working class, will have a major role to play. This is not to imply that there is something heroic in being a worker or member of the trade union movement, but rather that the working class occupies a strategic position in society. The trade union movement gets its distinctive, strategically important role, precisely because it organises those who, through their labour, create value in

society. By withdrawing their labour (strike), or through other forms of action that affects economic interests in society (industrial action), organised labour wields a potential power that cannot be matched by any other social movement in society. This power is indispensable if we are to win the battle against those hugely powerful economic interests which are linked to a continued exploitation of fossil energy sources. In other words, winning the trade union movement's support for the climate struggle will be absolutely crucial in order to prevent a climate catastrophe.

However, potential power is one thing. To have the ability and the will, as well as the preconditions to exercise it, and exercise it for what, is something else. Here, there are material, political, and social considerations, as well as issues of conscience to be addressed. In order for the trade union movement to assume a leading role in the fight against climate change, this struggle has, both strategically and tactically, to be unified with the social struggle. This means that the environmental and climate struggle, as we know it from our societies over the past decades, must be less moralistic, less individually oriented and less idealistic. Indeed, it needs to be more strongly linked to people's concrete living conditions – and be guided by a vision of a better society – one that is worth fighting for.

In the current situation, however, trade unions are on the defensive across the world and under tremendous pressure from powerful economic forces. At the same time, it is strongly marked by the deep political and ideological crisis that has hit the entire labour movement – including its traditional political parties. If the labour movement is going to assume a leading role in the fight against climate change, it will therefore need first to revitalise, refocus and reactivate itself – at all levels. The struggle for better pay and members' immediate interests at the individual workplace will still be important, but not sufficient in the future. A broader perspective will be needed: one where the trade union movement will have to gear up for a fight over the kind of society we want. This is not new in the history of the trade union and labour movements, but in recent decades both critique of the system and the vision of another society has been pushed into the background.¹ The current economic and political developments, with wide-ranging crises affecting a number of areas, could force change in this respect.

Currently, there are varying degrees of knowledge and awareness about the climate crisis and varying degrees of commitment to it among trade unions. Groups of workers (not least those within the public sector) that are rarely directly affected by climate action, or which work for businesses seeking to expand as a result of the necessary restructuring (those in, say, public transport and renewable energy), seem to be the ones most readily engaging in climate change policy. Understandably, hesitation and scepticism about getting too deeply involved in this struggle is most present in groups of workers whose jobs are directly linked to production, transportation and use of fossil energy resources. Therefore, increased knowledge of the climate crisis, and political control of the extensive transition that will need to take place (one that ensures a fair distribution of the advantages and disadvantages and secures people's economic and social security) will be absolutely crucial in order to mobilise the whole of the trade union movement in the struggle to avoid the climate crisis.

¹ I address this in detail in the following article: Wahl, A.: European Labor: The Ideological Legacy of the Social Pact, in *Monthly Review*, Vol. 55, No 8/2004. <http://monthlyreview.org/2004/01/01/european-labor-the-ideological-legacy-of-the-social-pact/>

From my work as a trade union representative within the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) for many years (including as leader of the Working Group on Climate Change) however, I've learned that we, through systematic work, education and debate, could go far in developing both knowledge and an ambitious and radical politics in the climate policy area within the trade union movement, including in areas where major adaptation is expected.

The transport industry is one of the top contributors to the growing greenhouse gas emission levels, and is the industry that is currently experiencing the highest growth. In the years to come, it will therefore have to go through a major process of reorientation if we are to succeed in reducing emissions sufficiently – including an acknowledgment that the need for transportation must be reduced if we are to achieve our goals. The ITF Congress in 2010, however, also sent a clear message that such a necessary reorientation will require much stronger political control of the economy.² Without a process that is planned and democratically controlled, and which can secure their social and economic rights, we cannot expect those workers, who will bear the brunt of the restructuring, to easily mobilise in the struggle against climate change.³

In Norway, three trade unions (the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees, the Norwegian Civil Service Union, and the Norwegian Electrician and IT Workers' Union) agreed in 2012 upon a radical climate policy statement with a system-critical stance⁴ in collaboration with the Oslo office of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO). The statement effectively bestowed upon these organisations a proactive role within the Norwegian trade union movement, and it was inspired by the work done within the International Transport Workers' Federation. Later on, this work was followed up in different ways by a number of campaigns, such as the Klimavalg (Climate Election) in 2013, the informal Klimakameratene (Climate Comrades) network, the “Bridge to the Future” conference (which met for the third time on 19 February this year)⁵, and the associated “100,000 Climate Jobs Now” campaign.⁶ The Bridge to the Future conference was effective in bringing together Norwegian trade union and environmental movements and the Church of Norway (as well as numerous other organisations) – admittedly, an unlikely alliance, but in fact one that is currently capable of taking a position on controversial issues. The fact that they have rallied around a petition for “100,000 Climate Jobs Now – Reduce Oil Production!” is a perfect example of people at grassroots level managing to challenge those major movers and shakers in Norwegian society with strong economic interests in the oil industry.

The South African trade union confederation COSATU and, in particular, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), are otherwise the trade unions in the world

² The in-depth climate document which formed the basis of the ITF's policy development, the ITF Congress statement, and other relevant information on transport and climate are available here:

<http://www.itfglobal.org/en/cross-sectoral-work/climate-justice/resources/>

³ For more information on the ITF's approach, see appendix 1.

⁴ The broad Campaign for the Welfare State joined this statement at a later date. More details here:

http://www.velferdsstaten.no/Forsiden/?article_id=96528

⁵ <http://broentilframtiden.com/english/>

⁶ This campaign was described by Ytterstad, A. (2015): Climate jobs as tipping point: Norwegian grassroots challenging the oil and climate change hegemony, in Borgnäs, K., Eskelinen, T., et al. (Eds): The Politics of Ecosocialism: Transforming welfare, Oxford: Routledge.

which have developed the most radical platforms for their climate politics – platforms with an unambiguously socialist perspective.⁷

A radical redistribution of wealth

In their politics, trade unions need to recognise that we are facing a crisis of such a serious nature and with such potential catastrophic consequences that, more than ever in recent history, will shape the future of humanity. In addition to the dramatic global climate crisis, we, in many parts of Europe and the world, are experiencing an economic, social, and political crisis. The capitalist mode of production is in deep crisis. Democracy is being undermined and weakened.⁸ The balance of power between labour and capital has changed dramatically – in favour of the latter. One result of this trend is a formidable concentration of wealth in society. This increasing inequality is indeed central to the fight against several of the aforementioned crises, including the climate crisis. Without a radical redistribution of wealth, it will not be possible to develop a socially just and inclusive society. It will simply not be possible to mobilise people for all-encompassing social change if a small minority in society appropriates most of the wealth created, securing for itself the benefits and leaving the majority to take the disadvantages (foot the bill). Hence, a demand for the radical redistribution of society's wealth is a precondition for people to let themselves be mobilised against the climate crisis.

However, one of the results of the neoliberal offensive we have witnessed globally since 1980 has been a reverse redistribution: from the bottom upwards, and to a degree which is unparalleled in human history. The 80 richest individuals in the world now own as much as the 'poorest' half of the global population, and the richest one per cent of the global population will soon own more than the rest owns collectively.⁹ These are symptoms of a sick society. Of course, in such a situation it would be completely impossible to get any support from most people, and especially from those who have the least – as well as from the poor countries – for necessary climate action, if they can risk losing an even greater share in society's wealth. Therefore, without linking the fight against climate change to wealth redistribution politics, it will hardly be possible to mobilise the social forces necessary to push through the kind of climate action sufficient to prevent a climate catastrophe.

Climate policy can therefore not be reduced to a question of sacrifice, about what most people must renounce of prosperity, welfare and other hard-won benefits and rights as part of the environmental movement insists. The fight against climate change must first and foremost be developed within the narrative of creating a better society for everyone. Demands for action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases must therefore go hand in hand with demands for a radical redistribution – both from the north to the south and from the rich to the poor in our own societies. If the burden of climate politics is imposed on those who have the least, it will simply not be possible to mobilise them for the action that is necessary to save the climate.

⁷ Please refer, for example, to the speech given by Cedric Gina, NUMSA President, at a conference organised by Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUNE) in New York on 10-12 October 2012:

<http://www.numsa.org.za/article/numsa-president-speech-in-new-york-2012-10-11-1/>

⁸ I address this more extensively in the following article – Wahl, A.: European Labor: Political and Ideological Crisis in an Increasingly More Authoritarian European Union, in *Monthly Review*, Vol. 65 No 8/2014.

<http://monthlyreview.org/2014/01/01/european-labor/>

⁹ Oxfam (2015). *Wealth: Having it all and wanting more*, London, p. 2-3.

http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/ib-wealth-having-all-wanting-more-190115-en.pdf

This means that a successful climate policy will have to demand greater democratic control of the economy, since it is the only way we can implement such a radical redistribution of society's wealth. However, this is exactly what we need also to solve a number of other social problems and meet the comprehensive economic and social crises we face.

If we are to halt the over-exploitation of our non-renewable resources, our production and distribution methods, as well as the ways in which we consume, will need to undergo radical change. However, it is mainly in the production and not in the distribution sphere, that power relations in society are constituted. These power relations are linked to the ownership relations in the production sphere, since there is where value is created and where the most important struggles on the distribution of wealth are being fought. Those who own the means of production (the capital) and who control where and how they are used ('control powers') also have the greatest say over how the returns are distributed. You merely need to look at the top 1 to 10 per cent who have usurped most of the wealth created across the globe over the past 20-30 years. Thus, the power and ownership relations in production are decisive also for consumption, for the distribution of the goods and services produced. This struggle, therefore, goes to the core of the economic system, and in this way, the fight against climate change will become an important part of the interest-based struggle in society.

In this context, the wholesale commercialisation of our society presents an important challenge in the fight against climate change. The market conquers ever larger swathes of our lives, and self-interest, competition, and consumerism are being promoted as values superior to solidarity, cooperation, and sustainable use of resources. However, increasing social and psychological problems in society indicate that current social developments are on the wrong track. The sense of powerlessness and increased control from above reinforces this.

Nonetheless, there is little evidence to suggest that consumerism and ever-increasing consumption are making us 'happier' people (when our basic needs are met, that is).¹⁰ Instead, what we see at work is a tendency towards what many people have described as a pursuit of a growing number of commercial goods and services that is increasingly manifesting as 'false satisfaction of real needs'. Advertising and massive media pressure generate new needs all the time or, more precisely, offer to meet such needs, which, when they fail to produce the promised effect, merely succeed in whetting people's appetites for an ever greater number of ways in which satisfaction can be found. The growing economic and social inequalities in society are cynically exploited with promises of 'prosperity and happiness' being commercialised and being made subject to market transactions. Rather than being addressed, the increasingly skewed balance of power within civic and working life is being obscured, and attention from it diverted, through the consumer society's commercial and individual 'diagnoses'. All this while discontent and dissatisfaction in society increases. The fact that the growing sense of powerlessness and subjugation *can* fuel resistance and become an organised struggle to shift the balance of power seems less and less to be a possible alternative. It is this struggle that needs to be revitalised if consumerism is to be pressed back, and if the fight against climate change is to have any chance of success.

Planned transition

As has already been mentioned, the fight against climate change will require a sea change in society. Activities that adversely affect the climate have to be shut down, while renewable

¹⁰ This is well documented in Pickett, K. and Wilkinson, R. (2010): *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, London: Penguin Books.

energy, energy saving, and environmentally sustainable activities should be developed. For this to be supported by the public, the changes must occur in a way that will safeguard people's social and economic security and, ultimately, create a better society for everyone. That individual groups of workers have to bear the burden through unemployment and marginalization, will not be accepted. Rights and duties should be distributed equally, and alternative solutions should be developed. In other words, it has to be a just transition. This can only be achieved in a planned and systematic fashion, i.e. through democratic processes.

Put differently, if we are to save the climate, we need a new brand of democratic control – including of the economic. We need an offensive and proactive industrial policy. We need a controlled shift of investment from non-renewable to renewable energy sources. We need a reorientation of existing industries and a reindustrialisation based on renewable energy. We need massive investment in public transport. We need a completely new approach to land-use and urban planning, one with the environment and climate at its core. We must strengthen research and development, as well as innovation and skills development. In short, we must do what is necessary to attain the scientific target of keeping the temperature rise below 1.5-2.0°C. None of this will occur on its own if left to market anarchy. In light of the above, democratic and political control of the economy and society is a prerequisite to preventing a climate crisis.

All serious research has shown that the necessary action against the climate crisis will create more jobs than it will cut, as has also been pointed out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).¹¹ Extensive unemployment resulting from a necessary shift in climate policy does not therefore pose a threat, provided of course that the shift takes place in a planned and politically controlled manner. However, we can talk of major changes when it comes to the types of jobs that will be needed. Job change, retraining, skills development and several other measures will be necessary to meet the needs of sustainable employment. Such planned and politically controlled restructuring, however, will not happen overnight, with mass redundancies and high unemployment. Assuming that they take place systematically and are managed politically, these are processes that, in most areas, will take decades to unfold. The natural turnover in the labour market will be more than sufficient to bring about such a restructuring without redundancies. Of course, over time there will be fewer of some types of jobs and more of others, but all this *can* be achieved through managed processes – with full social and economic security, and without mass unemployment.

However, unemployment as a phenomenon is primarily related to how labour under capitalism is turned into a market commodity, dependent on supply and demand – and heavily influenced by conjunctures and crises in this economic system. As the economy needs to be brought under democratic control in order to implement the necessary climate policy, it will also be possible to distribute the necessary labour in society in a way which is very different to today. This means that technological development and increasing productivity in the workplace can translate to shorter working hours to a much greater degree. The necessity of slowing down the depletion of our natural resources points in the same direction. Of course, how increased value added is extracted and distributed between labour and capital in our society today, and how unemployment and economic and social security for the unemployed develop, are questions related to workers' power in the workplace as well as in society. The

11

http://unfccc.int/files/documentation/submissions_from_observers/application/pdf/international_labour_organization_%28ilo%29_to_the_adp.pdf

distribution of benefits and burdens in society is a question to do with the balance of power in society – primarily between labour and capital. This will remain the case in the fight against climate change.

Democratisation of the energy sector

Essentially, climate politics is about energy politics, since it is above all a matter of replacing non-renewable energy sources with renewable ones. Companies operating in the fossil fuel (coal, oil, and natural gas) industry are economic giants. In 2009, seven of the world's ten largest companies by turnover were oil companies.¹² Often, they dominate a country's entire economy. This makes them powerful political players, with major influence on government policy. They use their power to find fault with and oppose necessary climate action, not least in connection with the annual climate summits organised under UN auspices (Conference of the Parties – COP). Therefore, if we are to succeed in preventing a climate disaster, the energy sector is the most important social sector over which to gain democratic control.

A handful of trade unions worldwide have recognised this and established the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) network.¹³ So far, four global union federations (PSI, ITF, IUF and EI), as well as about 45 national federations and trade unions from 17 countries, have joined this network. The initiative was taken by and the Secretariat established at the Global Labor Institute at New York's Cornell University, but it has later on moved to the Murphy Institute at New York's City University. The network has increasingly made its mark on international meetings with climate politics as their focus. During the trade union conference held in connection with the Rio+20 Summit in 2012, the network contributed to shaping the statement which called for bringing energy and other strategic sectors under democratic control.

Later, similar formulations have been incorporated into climate policy statements from wider parts of the international trade union movement. For example, in the statement it had prepared for the Lima climate summit in December 2014 (COP 20), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) stated that 'democratic ownership of energy is needed if we are to achieve ambitious climate action. Energy, along with other common goods that belong to humanity (air, water), must be brought, administered and kept under public control. Energy companies need to be restructured in order to allow for broad democratic control and oversight, including a strong scheme of workers' participation.'¹⁴

Nowadays, many people have a distorted picture of what is actually happening in the energy sector globally. Through the media, from politicians and actors in the energy industry we are often given the impression that there is a systematic shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy taking place. However, this is not the case. It is true that we have seen a growth in renewable energy production, but from a very low level. It merely represents a supplement to fossil fuels, which continues to grow at an alarming rate. In the 1990-2013 period, greenhouse gas emissions in the world increased by 60 per cent.¹⁵ More than half of the growing global demand for energy is still met by coal, and if current trends persist, more than three quarters

¹² ITF (2010). Transport Workers and Climate Change: Towards Sustainable, Low-carbon Mobility. Discussion document. London, p. 19. <http://www.itfglobal.org/media/643630/itf-climate-change-conference-discussion-document-2010.pdf>

¹³ <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org>

¹⁴ http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/COP20_ITUCcontribution_EN1.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.globalcarbonproject.org/carbonbudget/15/hl-compact.htm>

of new demand for energy will continue to be met by fossil fuels in 2035. According to the US Energy Information Agency (EIA), fossil fuels will continue to meet as much as 80% of world energy consumption in 2040.¹⁶ This is one of the main reasons why the energy sector must be brought under democratic control if we are to prevent a climate crisis – not to mention climate catastrophe.

A climate policy shift in energy production cannot merely mean that today's fossil fuels will be replaced by renewable resources – all other things being equal. Around 1.6 billion people (20 per cent of world population) currently have no regular access to electricity. Therefore, in this respect, too, we need a redistribution in favour of those who are poorest and who currently have no access to electricity. That can hardly happen in a setting where electricity is produced for profit and with the current balance of power in the fossil energy sector. This is why we now have popular movements (in some circles in the north, but especially in the south) fighting, not only for increased democratic control of energy, but also for a far greater share of small-scale production to be placed under the control of local communities and local co-operative movements. After all, both solar and wind energy are very well suited to such decentralised models.

Many benefits lie ahead

As mentioned, a shift to an environmentally sustainable society will require major changes, confront us with enormous challenges and saddle us with many new burdens. On the other hand, such changes will also bring a number of advantages. Firstly, thousands upon thousands of new, cleaner jobs. A new, international movement is beginning to develop in this area. Thanks to the joint efforts of academics, environmentalists, and trade unions, such movements or initiatives have already been established in the UK¹⁷, South Africa¹⁸ (under the name 'One Million Climate Jobs' in both countries), and Norway ('A Hundred Thousand Climate Jobs Now!'). A climate policy shift will create many new jobs in three areas in particular: renewable energy, public transport and building insulation. In addition, many new jobs will of course have to be created as a result of the essential restructuring of existing industries; and new industries and business will have to be established.

A shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy will also provide formidable advantages in terms of reducing pollution in the workplace and local communities. The extraction and use of fossil fuels for transportation, heating, and power generation produces not only major greenhouse gases (especially CO₂), but also a number of toxic and hazardous gases, liquids, and particles. In particular, the more recent extreme forms of oil and gas exploitation, based on tar sands and fracking, lead to extensive health and pollution problems. This means that the health benefits of a shift to renewable energy will also be enormous, as was rightly pointed out by a nurses' union in the United States (the New York State Nurses' Association).¹⁹ The health authorities of the State of New York recently investigated the health effects of fracking, and published a report which led Governor Andrew Cuomo to impose a ban on this exploitation method in New York.²⁰

¹⁶ <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/not-funny-another-energy-report-says-were-cooked/>

¹⁷ <http://www.climate-change-jobs.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.climatejobs.org.za/>

¹⁹ <http://www.nysna.org/public-health-wins-over-fracking#.VPbvY7I0zIU>.

²⁰ New York State Department of Health (2014). *A Public Health Review of High Volume Hydraulic Fracturing for Shale Gas Development*. http://www.health.ny.gov/press/reports/docs/high_volume_hydraulic_fracturing.pdf

Nevertheless, since the necessary shift in climate policy will require increased democratic control over the economy, it is likely that we will be able to reap the greatest benefits for society in this particular area. A more democratic political control of the economy will entail less market power. Less market power will lead to less competition – competition that has become excessively fierce in many areas as a result of the global neoliberal offensive, which emerged around 1980.

This will, in particular, affect the situation in the labour market, where deregulation, and thus increased competition, driven by employers and governments over the past few decades, has been used to push down wages and undermine working conditions, resulting in the brutalisation of large sections of the labour market. Increased democratic control of the economy will therefore reduce such competition and pressures in the workplace on a tremendous scale. As a result, we could see a labour market emerge that is better suited to people's physical, psychological, and biological make-up – i.e. one with less stress and fewer health problems.

A society and labour market that are no longer subject to the iron law of market competition, and where the commodification of increasing parts of our social reproduction is no longer a dominant trend, represent a possibility to prioritise other values. Among other things, we will be able to distribute the necessary work in society differently than we do today. A sustainable use of resources in society will lay the foundation for working hours to be shortened and reallocated on a massive scale, with far more leisure time and a rethink of our communities and our social life. Last, but not least, successful implementation of necessary climate policy measures will bring us the greatest of all benefits: better living conditions for future generations.

Failed market solutions

Climate change is linked to physical laws. While both trade unions and politics traditionally tend to look for compromises, no compromise is possible with the laws of nature. Either we do what is necessary to keep the temperature rise below 1.5-2.0°C (about which there is an overwhelming scientific consensus), or we will have to deal with the consequences. On the whole, they are negative, leading ultimately to an all-out climate catastrophe. Continuing with current climate policy, both nationally and internationally, clearly points to catastrophe. In that respect, the climate policy we have pursued to date is completely inadequate. For example, Norway's climate policy has been dominated by three factors: the purchasing of CO₂ quotas in developing countries and in the EU emissions trading market (i.e. buying rights to continue emitting greenhouse gases at home); tree planting and rainforest conservation (also mainly in developing countries); and the capture and storage of CO₂ in the ground. Otherwise, one creates the impression that everything will go on as before. While some of these measures, viewed in isolation, are steps in the right direction, there is a striking lack of awareness of necessary emission reductions and the extensive transition that will be needed if we are to develop a low-carbon economy. This has a demobilising and demoralising effect – and discourages the necessary willingness to change.

Up until now, market-based solutions to the climate crisis, primarily through the purchasing and sale of carbon quotas (which have been promoted by governments and powerful capital interests), have largely failed. Nor have global summits (COP) or agreements so far proved to be our saving grace. Here, there is every reason to learn from previous struggles in our societies that have moved humanity forward socially. To the degree that we have achieved

increased social equality, jobs for all, decent working conditions, poverty alleviation, gender equality etc., we have not done so because of global summits. Yes, we need binding international agreements in order to save the climate, but in order to achieve that, it is necessary to mobilise the broad social forces that are necessary to effect change – on the basis of alternative solutions built on solidarity, equality and people’s needs.

Taking the climate crisis seriously will involve far more far-reaching economic and political changes and regulations than we have seen to date. Governments and multinational corporations have so far proven incapable of taking the steps that are necessary to save us from a climate catastrophe. Although the most recent agreement at COP21 in Paris in December 2015 was hailed as a victory with the commitment to the aspirational limit of 1.5° of global warming, only 22 countries have ratified the agreement thus far, many of them small, vulnerable island nations that account for a tiny percentage of emissions. More significantly, climate experts have concluded that the weak voluntary commitments which governments brought to Paris, fall far short of those needed to prevent global temperatures rising by more than the crucial 2C, let alone 1.5C, by the end of the century. Stanford University’s Professor Chris Field, co-chair of the IPCC working group on adaptation to climate change, expressed it in this way: “From the perspective of my research I would say the 1.5C goal now looks impossible or at the very least, a very, very difficult task. We should be under no illusions about the task we face.”²¹

After 20 years of climate talks, the goal of which was to stabilise and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, emissions have in fact increased by 60 per cent between 1990 and 2013²². Under the power relations that have been established after the neoliberal offensive of around 1980, it has proved impossible to implement the necessary measures to save the climate. It is obvious that the capital and market forces that have been pulling in opposite directions have been too strong. Consequently, there is hardly any other conclusion possible than that they have had their chance and that they have failed. It is therefore time that other social forces took over.

Broad popular alliances

In this article I have argued that the fight against climate change must be seen in a much broader social context than just being an environmental political problem that can be solved within the current economic system – with the use of any new technology here and some market mechanisms there. The problem has arisen in a world where some of the strongest economic interests are concentrated in the fossil energy sector, and in an economic system which is based on eternal expansion and growth – capitalism without growth is a capitalism in crisis – and with a short-termism in the hunt for the economic returns which leads to an unbridled exploitation of our natural resources.

The climate crisis is about to unfold and take on far more dramatic proportions precisely at a time when our economic system is in deep crisis. In its tow, it also brings far-reaching crises related to society, politics, and the food supply chain. A bottom-up redistribution of wealth in society, on a scale unparalleled in human history, contributes to reinforcing and exacerbating all these crises. This makes the situation far more serious and dangerous as the various crises are interwoven and calls for many of the same measures and actions to be implemented. This

²¹ The *Observer*, 6 August 2016.

²² See footnote 14.

makes it easier also for the fight against climate change to be integrated into the social struggle in an all-out battle over the kind of society we want.

In this situation, increased democratic control over the economy will be crucial in general, but in the energy sector in particular, if we are to prevent a climate catastrophe. Of course, such a democratisation of the economy will not be born out of rational deliberation and persuasive argumentation alone. Since we need to challenge some of the most powerful economic interests in society, we have to brace ourselves for a formidable struggle and mobilise enormous social forces in order to succeed. In other words, we need to build long-term, broad popular alliances. This applies, in particular, to an alliance between the trade union and environmental movements: the former because of its strategic position in society, the latter because it possesses much of the knowledge and insight required to develop alternatives to the current fossil fuel setup.

Such an alliance policy must take into account the differences between the two movements. It will be necessary for the environmental movement to deepen its understanding of the functioning of the capitalist economy – of class, class relations, and of the social conflict – whilst ensuring that the trade union movement deepens its understanding of the environmental issues. Moreover, we need to develop strategies that are sufficiently ambitious to prevent a climate catastrophe.²³ The fight against climate change is about democratising the economy and society, redistributing wealth both within society and from the north to the south, solidarity distribution of gains and burdens, as well as free use of our common knowledge – without running against patent rights barriers. In order to save the climate, we need to change society. Only then will we be able to create the prerequisites for a better life for everyone – including our descendants.

²³ At a meeting organised by the New York office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation during a UN climate summit in September 2014, I launched, as a contribution to such a debate, 'Ten Points for a Labour Movement Climate Strategy' - http://www.velferdsstaten.no/tema/verden/klima/?article_id=124429

Appendix 1

Case-study of the ITF, written by Alana Dave, ITF education officer and “Our Public Transport” programme leader.

In 2010, the ITF adopted a bold policy on climate change and transport. The policy was shaped by a comprehensive discussion document produced in collaboration with the Global Labor Institute at Cornell University, and this was debated at a conference attended by over 400 representatives from ITF affiliates globally.

The central ideas underpinning the ITF approach include:

- Unions should take a science-based approach to emissions reductions and therefore contribute to defining and implementing the radical transformations which are necessary. Technological solutions alone cannot reduce emissions to the levels demanded by science and must be accompanied by major changes in the way economic and social life is organised.
- Unions should take a whole economy approach to climate change and emission reductions, and different sectors should therefore be viewed as part of a whole and not in isolation from each other. In particular unions, regardless of their sector, should be concerned with how energy is produced and distributed.
- The labour movement needs to demand and contribute to measures that strengthen democratic control of the economy and wealth redistribution. Addressing the climate crisis calls for a greater degree of public ownership and democratic oversight in those sectors that either generate the most emissions or have the most potential to reduce emissions.
- A just transition for workers must be guaranteed and has to involve job creation, decent work, a radical redistribution of wealth and a better quality of life for all.
- The demand for transport is created elsewhere in the economy, and the continued growth of transport emissions can only be addressed by transforming current production, distribution and consumption patterns. Neoliberal transport policies have exacerbated both environmental problems and social problems for transport workers, and unions therefore need to link the climate struggle to the wider industrial and social struggles of workers.

Through a well structured programme of political education supported by Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany and Union to Union in Sweden, the ITF has engaged its affiliated unions in a process of critical thinking and reflection. The education has not only raised awareness about climate science and the potential consequences of dangerous climate change, but also developed the analytical and conceptual tools to understand the systemic nature of the crisis and the alternatives. The primary purpose is to strengthen a critical consciousness enabling activists to build this perspective in their unions, and to initiate and lead trade union action on climate change and transport. The first global action took place in October 2016 when an active group of ITF affiliates linked with workers and passengers in their respective cities to highlight the need for improved public transport. Materials to support this process, as well as a climate change blog²⁴ have been developed.

The ITF is now deepening its climate work by developing a global programme to strengthen union organising and campaigning in public transport. This programme links industrial struggles of unions with the wider environmental and political struggle beyond the workplace

²⁴ www.itfclimatechangeblog.org

to reduce emissions, increase access to mobility, create millions of jobs and improve the quality of life in cities. The challenge is to form the alliances which will mobilise and build the power necessary to win radical public transport solutions globally.