

# The climate justice movement, trade unions and the working class

Climate change is a public health issue and workers' rights issue

The past three decades are characterised by an unprecedented rise in CO2 emissions as well as the gradual development of a global movement against climate change, which routinely surfaces in the run-up to the 'COP' conferences.<sup>1</sup> As the global community is still far off fulfilling the targets of the 2016 Paris Agreement, new kinds of environmental and climate movements, such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, have emerged, using the slogan of 'climate justice'. Recent school student strikes and large-scale climate change demonstrations are an expression of a deep feeling that large numbers of people in the Global North want to do *something* about climate change. Many of them are engaging in political action for the first time and understandably look towards the existing structures of climate activism in order to articulate their hopes.

Yet, there are numerous issues that limit the ability of the climate movement to involve a broader spectrum of workers and trade unionists in their movement. Many of these are related to the organising tactics but there are also wider politics at play...

## The 'NGO-ization' of climate politics

Since the late 1990s mainstream NGOs have been mobilising their members and subscribers onto the streets before major summits of the G8, World Trade Organisation and the COP talks. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, NGOs took the global stage with a massive presence. Since the mid-1990s, many multinational companies also run their own company-internal environmental campaigns and set their own environmental goals. It has become attractive to sign up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, as environmental and social governance features higher on the agendas of institutional investors.

From the Rio Earth Summit onwards, larger NGOs have succeeded in getting a 'seat at the table' on policy processes concerning the environment and climate change. Unlike trade unions that are financed by their membership dues, many NGOs are however structured like private business enterprises without any democratic leadership and are dependent either on government funding or large private donations (or both). Thus, they must always be able to showcase their successes and keep their donors satisfied. That offers one possible explanation as to why some NGOs have keenly promoted market-based mechanisms and technological 'fixes' currently being promoted by transnational corporations. Such NGOs may argue that without their involvement the climate would be in a far

worse situation, but in doing so, they also seek to legitimise their participation in a highly ecologically ineffectual process.

A group of critical NGOs formed a loose network under the banner of 'Climate Justice Now' when the COP13 in Bali failed in 2007. This network laid the basis for global justice activists and radical environmentalists to come together at the 2009 World Social Forum in B el em to draft the Declaration for Climate Justice. This enabled various wings of the climate movement to mobilise huge numbers of people into campaigning, protesting, and letter writing. The subsequent 2009 Copenhagen climate summit was a turning point: it did succeed in building a strong foundation for a broad movement with a minimal consensus around the ubiquitous slogan of 'climate justice', which continues to inspire today's school strikers. Nonetheless, the COP15 ended with no binding targets. The breakdown of the COP15 talks made it clear that lobbying and expert work had become obsolete. NGOs were no longer exerting the same influence as they had done for the previous fifteen years. Meanwhile, the radical wing of the climate movement spearheaded by 'Reclaim Power' was not able to delegitimise the UNFCCC process as they had hoped for.

One possible explanation for this was the absence of trade unions and organised labour from their mobilisations. Indeed, trade unions have not yet realised their potential in exposing companies' green-washing strategies and regulating capital through their collective agreements from below. Such approaches are more necessary than ever, as it is unlikely that the climate crisis will be solved through the free market. Even to this day policy-makers and world leaders are hesitant to use the state to drive through climate solutions. Instead, policy discussions seem to be centred on providing businesses and consumers with incentives, omitting workers from the discussion entirely.

## Re-distribution, development and the North/South-divide

Long before Fridays For Future, climate justice had been framed in terms of re-distribution and the right to development. Amongst others, the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and former World Bank President James Wolfensohn showed their support for climate justice. Meanwhile, the European Parliament urged its member states to integrate 'climate justice' into their long-term perspectives

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until 2050. Thus, it could be argued that ‘climate justice’ has already been co-opted to serve the interests of powerful elites.

However, there has also been a sharp contrast between the nature of climate protests in the developed and developing worlds. While countries in the Global South are more likely to be located in geographical regions more prone to the destabilising effects of climate change, trade unions, NGOs and civil society in the Global South have been historically less institutionalised and influential than in most developed states. This underdevelopment thus limits their capacity to effectively mobilise against the disastrous effects of climate change. Meanwhile, northern environmental movements throughout the twentieth century fell prey to aligning themselves with forces which did not consider the working-class majority. Some NGOs purport to protest on behalf of people in developing countries, thus representing a supposedly dispossessed and powerless population overseas, while they explicitly rally support for developed country governments and their international development schemes.

International movements, such as the climate justice movement, risk omitting the internal class nature of societies in favour of stylised ‘north versus south’ or ‘east versus west’ narratives. The demand for climate debt reparations puts the Global South into the limelight of the struggle, but runs the risk of misconstruing the fundamental conflict over climate change as one between rich and poor countries. It masks that there are real class conflicts over climate change *within* countries of the Global North as well as Global South. Unless it also challenges the balance of power between capital and labour – at home and abroad – the climate movement will ultimately neglect existent inequalities within states. Financial redistribution from North to South is more necessary than ever but the same also applies within the same country. The reduction of greenhouse gases in the Global North requires the richest of those societies to cut back on their lifestyles.

### Class and climate justice

Two problems specific to the climate movement concern the issue of ‘individual solutions’ to climate change, and the concept of ‘degrowth’ as an economic strategy promoted by radical climate activists. Degrowth activists advocate the downscaling of production and consumption, since they argue that economic development has not only reached its ecological limits but already passed them. In that sense, climate justice means that the rich countries should scale back.

Yet this doesn’t offer a perspective to low-wage workers in the countries of the Global North. Members of today’s low-wage workforce, including care workers, cleaners and security guards, face significant health-and-safety risks: cleaning polluted industrial sites, guarding nuclear-power stations, caring for older people in high-temperature

environments and so on. Outsourcing such work has not only left these groups without sick pay or pension rights but also at the sharp end of the climate crisis. These are some of the fastest growing occupational groups as well as those with the lowest rates of unionisation.

Thus, the movement for meaningful climate justice must also succeed in collectively focusing its attention on transforming the political parameters at the national level. ‘Climate justice’ can only serve as a vehicle if it contains a strategic vision of the role of labour in the process of achieving ‘climate justice’ as well as its role in a carbon-neutral society.

Rather than relying on corporations’ self-regulation, solutions need to come from people in the affected communities and workplaces impacted disproportionately by climate change. Climate change is a public health issue and workers’ rights issue. Yet, the climate movement is plagued by a deep-seated pessimism about the trade union movement and the ability of workers to change the world. This produces voluntarism on the one hand and determinism on the other.

### Hope and ‘catastrophism’

In order to reach out to working class people and the labour movement, the environmental and climate movements must rescind their ‘catastrophism’. Every climate summit is touted as ‘the last chance to save the planet from burning’. Such catastrophism serves a deeply reactionary function: it does not promise political change and social transformation; floods and forest fires will not wake the masses from their apathy and hail a new world. Rather, basing one’s political strategy on apocalyptic scenarios only demobilises and fosters fear, inaction and cynicism.

Fortunately, the climate strikers from Fridays for Future have started to advance a message of hope that there is still time to save the planet. In her book ‘No one is too small to make a difference’, Greta Thunberg addresses the multiple crises by arguing that some multinational companies and decision-makers are to blame and hold a moral responsibility for the current predicament. Instead of arguing that ordinary people ought to sacrifice, she always appeals to the rich, powerful and celebrities to use their platforms to bring about effective change.

Despite all these positive developments within the environmental movement as well as positive signs from the union movement, the mainstream media continues to frame the emerging dialogue between Fridays for Future and the trade union movement in binary terms, as if the defense of jobs will inevitably act against the wider interests of the planet. This is exactly the narrative that unions need to explode. The last thirty years of environmentalism show that the environmental movement will need unions’ institutional and organisational power at the workplace and sectoral level to make ‘climate justice’ a reality.

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1 The ‘Conference of Parties’ – known as ‘COP’ – is made up of representatives of the signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and is the decision-making body responsible for monitoring and reviewing the Convention’s implementation.