

## **Roundtable C13: No More Kicking and Screaming: Can Labor in North America Take the Lead on Climate Crisis?**

Discussion Leaders: Margrete Strand, Senior Trade Representative, Sierra Club; Nick De Carlo, Canadian Auto Workers; Eric Frumin, UNITE-HERE; Jeremy Brecher, Global Labor Strategies; Alejandro Villamar, Frente Autentico del Trabajo-Mexico

Facilitator: Sean Sweeney, PhD, Cornell ILR-Global Labor Institute

### **PRESENTATIONS**

**Margrete Strand Rangnes, Senior Trade Representative of the Sierra Club** expressed great encouragement as a result of the conference, acknowledging that the environmental community needs to realize the untapped potential of coalescing with labor. Citing a recent campaign in Ohio where the **Sierra Club** working in partnership with the **United Steelworkers** received unprecedented support and attention from citizenry, legislature, and media alike as one example of the influence Blue-green alliances can wield. Fusing the interests of labor and environment, this alliance has petitioned the Department of Commerce with regards to illegal logging in Indonesia in an attempt to connect the issues of employment, trade, development, climate, and environment.

**Nick De Carlo, Canadian Auto Workers (Health and Safety Department)** examined a few of the difficulties facing labor's leadership role in battling the climate crisis. Addressing the issue of competition between individual unions that will undoubtedly arise from transition is paramount. For labor to lead successfully, the questions of job loss and dislocation must be answered. Another obstacle to be overcome is that transition to a green economy leads to decentralization, which poses a challenge to the traditional model of centralized union organizing. It was also noted that management rights will have to be reevaluated to enable labor full access to the decision process regarding the means of production. Among some of the other challenges presented was the deep inequity between Northern and Southern economies with a need for labor to be united on both fronts in order to confront globalization. The significance of public investment and social control over such investments must be addressed as well; emphasizing that by its very nature labor is indeed positioned to lead a challenge of the established economic and political configuration.

**Alejandro Villamar of Frente Autentico del Trabajo-Mexico** reported on the conflicts arising from the formation of the tri-lateral **Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SSP)** described as the new NAFTA 'plus'. This agreement promotes the U.S. model of energy production for Mexico and Canada despite the environmental consequences. Recent **SSP** policies have resulted with energy plants now prohibited in the U.S. being constructed in Mexico to supply U.S. energy companies from across the border. Due to a lack of democracy and protections Mexican unions are in dire need of

steadfast alliances with U.S. and Canadian labor organizations if they are to take on a leadership role in challenging the crisis at hand.

**Eric Frumin from UNITE-HERE** restating the question; is it in labor's interest to address climate change and if so, what will labor do and will it make a difference? Explaining that **UNITE-HERE** has redefined their priorities placing the emphasis on organizing, it was observed that work on climate change offers great potential for contributing to the union's growth program. In so far as unions taking a leadership role it was pointed out, that in order to do so the declining state of labor must be addressed first. Thus, affirming that only if unions can reclaim a greater position of influence will they be able to affect the issues surrounding climate change.

**Jeremy Brecher, Global Labor Strategies** called for recognition of labor's present limitations for uniting on a global front, citing the American opposition to the **Kyoto Protocol** in contrast to European and Canadian labor movement support for the agreement as one of several divisive factors. Furthermore, the U.S. labor movement as a whole has yet to give true recognition to the seriousness of climate change, further deepening the divide. With widespread awareness of the climate crisis rising, labor must take a leadership role in seeking solutions or risk finding itself marginalized from the public consciousness. It was also noted that polls show that young people are deeply concerned with global warming and if labor does not take a leadership position it may be isolating itself from its own future. In order to lead, labor must take measures to address the very specific needs of the workers who may be negatively affected by transition while simultaneously addressing the potential benefit transition can have for other groups of workers.

## **DISCUSSION**

Leading off the discussion segment of this roundtable one participant from the **Service Employees International Union (SEIU)** spoke about the devastating consequences climate change is likely to bring, calling for more dialogue on adaptation. Ken Gould from the **Professional Staff Congress** expressed the necessity for labor driven greening technologies with an emphasis on public investment as opposed to the traditional methods of market driven technology propelled by private investment. Incorporating youth to the movement and the integration of labor and environmental justice must be a priority with education focusing on labor's own rank and file. **Judith Marshall from the United Steelworkers Union** addressed the urgency for a North American labor coalition to confront the **SPP** and the **North American Competitiveness Council (NACC)** which has proposed an increase of guest workers from Mexico to be made available for contracts in Canada to work the Northern Alberta tar sands, realizing a corporate vision that cares little for life or the environment. . Facilitator **Sean Sweeney** emphasized the need to continue the dialogue as a community away from the conference.