

POSITION PAPER AND STATEMENT

PRESENTED BY

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Climate change poses one of the most difficult issues for the international trade union movement to confront.

On the one hand, there is consensus among trade unionists that the science of climate change is real, and that global warming must be addressed. The phasing out of fossil fuels for energy generation is one of the cornerstones of environmentalist responses to the climate change issue, and is not something that unions can simply ignore as we struggle to fashion the appropriate trade union response to global warming.

At the same time, a trade union's primary responsibility is to represent and protect its membership. The struggle to protect existing jobs and expand employment opportunities is at the forefront of core trade union principles. Even before the current economic crisis, union jobs in the transport sector were under attack from technology, privatization, and consolidation.

These competing interests collide when unions tackle the issue of climate change. For hundreds of thousands of ITF affiliates' jobs are linked to the transport or utilization of fossil fuels - like coal and oil.

So, what should we as trade unionists do? Should we take the position that addressing climate change is paramount, and that if it causes our members to lose their jobs, then that is the price that our members must pay? I suppose, then, we would work to mitigate the adverse effects of such environmental policies by fighting for social programs like income maintenance, unemployment insurance and retraining?

Or we can, as I advocate, take the position that, as trade unionists, our pre-eminent responsibility is to defend our members' standard of living, and that starts with making sure they have a job. And if that means parting ways with environmentalists on the fossil fuel issue, so be it.

There are many, in all walks of life, who will argue the environmentalist position. But there is no one, who will stand up for working men and women, except us. We are the only institution capable of voicing the aspirations and needs of workers in the transport sector. And if that means taking positions that may be unpopular in the broader progressive movement, we must have the courage to stand alone.

I submit that it is a breach of our leadership role for us to embrace policies that put our members' jobs in jeopardy. It is our members' dues that financially sustain the very existence of the ITF.

We have a moral and fiduciary obligation to protect the real jobs our members have today, not to support policies that would eliminate them, in the fuzzy hope that new jobs in so-called green industries, will emerge to take their place.

I argue that it is possible, indeed necessary, for trade unions to oppose job-destroying initiatives associated with climate change. But, at the same time, we can unite with environmentalists on a range of policy issues. We can and should embrace policies that call for expedited research and investment in clean coal and oil technology and in the utilization of such fuels.

We certainly can join arms in calls for the expansion of mass transit and passenger rail. But we must draw a line against calls to reduce the use of fossil fuels today, before clean-coal and related technologies exist on a mass scale.

We cannot have it both ways, as we are trying to do in Motion One. On this all-important issue, we must be clear headed. We should not hide behind vague formulations in the motion that stop short of saying what we really mean. We cannot finesse our position. We must confront it boldly and clearly. Either we support immediate action to suppress the use of fossil fuels, as does most of the green movement, or we don't.

And to have that debate, we must understand the employment consequences of any position we adopt. On something so important, we cannot rely on vague estimates or abstract formulations. We must put real numbers and faces to our actions. That is why I submitted my amendment to Motion One. How many ITF affiliates' members' jobs are involved with the transport of coal and oil, and the utilization of those commodities as fuel, particularly, in air?

But, as a trade unionist, I should also be asking what impact, adopting policies calling for the suppression of fossil fuel use, would have on our union brothers and sisters in coal and oil production; in electric utility plants; in the construction of oil tankers and barges; in drilling equipment; and the manufacturing of automobiles and their transport to market.

In short, in the thousands of affiliated industries, most of which are heavily unionized. And most of which stand in stark contrast to the largely non-union, capital intensive emerging industries in the two most widely touted replacement energy technologies, wind and solar.

I believe the employment ramifications of the Reduce-Shift-Improve framework, supported by Motion One, are catastrophic.

Let us look at some of the facts we already know. I'll start with coal.

In the U.S., the transport of coal is vital to the freight rail industry; and, therefore, to thousands of U.S. rail workers. Coal amounts to 45% of U.S. rail tonnage, nearly a quarter of all rail revenue. Significant cutbacks in coal would have devastating impacts on rail employment, an industry that is more than 80% unionized. There are approximately 175,000 blue-collar, full-time, permanent jobs related to coal in the U.S., 31,000 in transportation. This does not include indirect employment. In the U.S., about 70% of coal reaches its final destination by rail, 11% by truck, and 10% by water.

But this is not uniquely a U.S. issue. Coal is Australia's principal energy source, providing 40% of its energy and 81% of its electricity. It is also Australia's top export by a significant margin, representing about 20% of the total value of all goods and services exported in 2008-2009. Over 150,000 Australians are employed in coal-related jobs. The transport of coal is important in India, South Africa, the Ukraine, Columbia, Russia, Indonesia, and many ITF-affiliated countries too numerous to mention here. Columbia, for example, is the largest exporter of coal to the U.S., followed by Indonesia.

Before adopting any resolution that calls for the reduction of coal utilization; and, therefore, its transport, we must understand the potential job impacts in each of our affiliates' countries. We need to understand exactly how many of our affiliates' jobs are now involved in coal transport.

The same principle applies to oil and its transport.

I submit that it is wrong for us to chart a course of greatly reducing reliance on fossil fuels such as coal and oil, when the transportation of coal and oil provides employment to hundreds of thousands of our members.

But the direction we are considering goes even farther than just suppressing the use of fossil fuels, as evidenced in the Cornell climate change paper. There, we see calls for major shifts in modal transportation, with rail favored over trucking. Is it proper for an international labor organization to adopt policies that so dramatically favor some affiliates over others?

My union, TCU, has an overwhelmingly rail based membership, both in freight and passenger, and we have thousands of members in mass transit as well.

So I suppose I should be overjoyed about the paper's call for shifting road transport to rail, and for shifting air travel to high-speed rail. But I'm not. Of course, neither is my parent union, the International Association of Machinists, with its large airline membership.

The ITF is an international organization that must stand for the interests of all our affiliates. We cannot adopt policies that would favor some over others. Yet, this is where Motion One will take us.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am a tireless advocate of expanding rail transportation. As the study reports, rail produces between five and ten times less emissions than road transport and requires four to seven times less energy, it is labor intensive, and I might add, union intensive.

A progressive U.S. think tank, the Economic Policy Institute, recently partnered with the rail industry in a major paper touting rail as the green transportation mode.¹

But the ITF is not an international railroad union organization. We have trucking, maritime and airline affiliates, and we cannot adopt policies that favor public investment in one mode at the expense of another. Rather, we must adopt policies that lift all of our affiliates.

But the Cornell paper goes even farther. As one of its major proposals, the Reduce component of the R-S-I framework, it calls for reducing the movement of goods and people, reducing the distances travelled, and substituting activities like bicycling and walking. I have never heard of a trade union organization advocating shrinkage of the very industries which employ its members.

Is it really in the interest of transport unions to "reduce travel" and to "reduce the distance that goods are shipped", as the paper calls for? Perhaps we should consider changing our name to the International Federation to Reduce Transportation", and the jobs that go with it.

While the ITF Executive Board has decided that the Climate Change paper will not be presented as a statement of ITF policy, as was originally intended, the damage has been done. The ITF Climate Change Working Group, together with the information and direction of Cornell University, form the basis of Motion One.

¹ "Full Speed Ahead: Creating Green Jobs Through Freight Rail Expansion", EPI, BlueGreen Alliance, 2010.

For example, the motion calls for the ITF to “develop sustainable alternatives based on Reduce-Shift-Improve framework.” That framework calls for the reduction of overall transportation and modal shifts within transportation from trucking and air to rail. I do not believe that the reduction of the transport sector, with the loss of jobs that would result, or choosing modal favorites, is in any way in the interest of the ITF and our collective membership. It is simply not enough to convincingly say we favor job creation in one part of the motion, when we advocate specific policies that have the opposite effect in another section.

And what about the supposed new jobs that await our members in the clean energy industries, the jobs that supposedly will mitigate the job losses spurred by reduced transport of coal and oil?

We hear so much about the promise of new work in emerging “green” industries. But what is the reality? For every group claiming the creation of new jobs, there are as many studies saying these industries are far less labor-intensive than our current energy mix.

The vast array of jobs in solar and wind, to cite two examples, are generated by the one-time construction of equipment and facilities, and there are precious few long term jobs for maintaining those wind farms and solar networks. And construction can be offshored to areas with the cheapest labor costs.

For example, China is now the world’s largest manufacturer of wind turbines and solar panels, and plans to be the biggest builder of nuclear power plants in the coming decade. But, I should note, the Chinese energy plan also preserves a central role for coal, as it has the world’s third largest reserves. China is now the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and has been by an ever-widening margin since 2006.²

Good Jobs First, a coalition of the Teamsters, the Laborers Union, and the Sierra Club, found in a study³ of U.S. green jobs that low pay is not uncommon, that wage rates at many wind and solar manufacturing facilities are below the national average for workers employed in the manufacture of durable goods, that offshoring is common, especially to low-wage venues like China, and that very few facilities are unionized, and this is often due to aggressive anti-union campaigns by so-called green employers.

The transport of coal and oil is ongoing, almost perpetual, producing a renewable stream of employment. Aside from the transport of solar panels and wind turbines equipment, what is the ongoing nature of transport in those energy fields? From the research I have seen, none.

² “Security Tops the Environment in China’s Energy Plan”, New York Times, June 17, 2010.

³ “High Road or Low Road, Job Quality in the New Green Economy”, February 3, 2009.

A recent Newsweek article⁴ points out that “the clean energy industry doesn’t have much in common with old, labor-intensive manufacturing industries like steel and cars. A more accurate comparison would be to the semiconductor industry, which was also expected to create a boom in high-tech jobs, but today employs mainly robots, and, non-union, low-paid workers.”

We also hear so much about retraining as the solution. Retraining for what jobs? I have yet to hear a worker I represent say that retraining is the answer. They want to keep the good jobs they have. They are not interested in policies that would eliminate those jobs, even if such elimination carries with it a retraining program for a job that may or may not exist.

The studies I have read show that most retraining programs in the U.S. are spectacularly unsuccessful in ultimately getting the trainees into jobs that are even close in income and benefits to the jobs they formerly held. Retraining should be a last resort for us as a policy goal, something to advocate only after jobs are eliminated, due to market and other forces, not as a policy device to allow for the elimination of the job in the first place for environmental reasons. Retraining, and other social responses like income support and unemployment insurance, only come into play when we have failed in our first responsibility – preserving and expanding the jobs we now represent.

So what should we do? We should strongly advocate the funding and expansion of mass transit and passenger rail, both high-speed and conventional. This is especially critical now, as mass transit universally relies on public funding, and such funding is under tremendous jeopardy due to the global fiscal crisis.

We should also encourage tax breaks for airlines which purchase new, fuel-efficient aircraft and urge our governments to pursue a breakthrough in renewable, lower-emitting fuels for use in all transportation modes.

National, regional and local governments are increasingly facing budgetary shortfalls, and too often the response is to cut back dramatically on funding for public transit. This is intensifying with the EU’s recent decision to abandon stimulus responses to the global economic crisis and to instead adopt fiscal austerity programs.

In the U.S., transit funding is tied to state and local budgets, which are experiencing massive shortfalls of tax revenue and therefore cutting all services, with mass transit not being spared. The ITF should make the fight for adequate funding for mass transit a major priority of our agenda. It is an area where our concern for jobs and the environment naturally intersect.

⁴ “The Myth of Green Jobs”, Newsweek, April 1, 2010.

We should also aggressively advocate expedited global investment into research, development and deployment of carbon capture and storage technologies, and any other technologies that would reduce emissions without threatening jobs in the coal and oil sectors. We should tie emission reduction to the implementation of such technologies. We can fully support fuel and energy efficiencies of vehicles. We should actively oppose global agreements that would significantly reduce emissions prior to the deployment of such technologies.

And we should ally ourselves with organizations advocating similar views.

But most of all, we should examine every policy proposal we adopt through the prism of whether it is in the tangible interest of the members we represent. This is especially critical in this time of deep recession and massive unemployment. And that, my friends, is the basis of my amendment.

We should be mobilizing with all our power to protect the jobs of our members, not advocating policies that jeopardize those jobs. Where those efforts converge with environmental concerns, such as in the development of carbon capture and storage technologies and the expansion of mass transit, we should enthusiastically join with the environmental movement in alliances to make those initiatives a reality.

But, where our interests diverge, such as in the job-eliminating moves to reduce transport as a whole or to suppress the use and transport of fossil fuels; we must have the courage to stand alone in defending our members' interests.

As trade unionists, we have a unique and sacred obligation – to voice the aspirations of working men and women everywhere. No one else will do it. Our members trust us to defend their interests.

It would shock them to realize that we are considering policies that might lead to their unemployment. We must be the champion of protecting existing jobs in transportation and growing new jobs in mass transit and other clean transportation modes. Our overriding priority must be to protect and enhance the workers we already represent.

I thank the ITF for giving me the opportunity to state my views in this important policy debate. At this time of worldwide recession and soaring unemployment, I believe it is critical that the ITF leave this conference and meeting as the front line defender of union jobs in the global transportation sector.

There is much we can do in a positive vein to address the challenges posed by climate change. But I passionately believe that we must not adopt policies that place our members' jobs in peril. And, at the very least, we should fully understand the consequences of our actions. Thank you.