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Transport Workers Fear Job Losses from Climate Change Action

By Emilio Godoy



MEXICO CITY, Aug 5, 2010 (IPS) - Transport workers are concerned that measures to mitigate climate change, like greenhouse gas emissions reduction, may put their jobs at risk, while experts are urging a transformation of the predominant transport model worldwide.

"The future of transport depends on sustainability. But there has to be a transition, because change can't happen overnight," Sandra Burleson of the United States' Union of Transport Workers, which represents 135,000 members in the air transport, public passenger service and railroad sectors, told IPS.

Links between transport and climate change are a central item for discussion at the 42nd Congress of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) being held in the Mexican capital Aug. 5-12.

Congress participants from 368 unions in 112 countries debated the issue Wednesday at a special one-day conference on the eve of the official opening. Divergent opinions were expressed about the global climate change crisis, and especially about the use of fossil fuels like coal and oil that are essential for transport today.

The head of the U.S. Transportation Communications International Union (TCU), Robert Scardelletti, told the forum Wednesday that it is possible, even necessary, for unions to oppose job-destroying initiatives associated with climate change.

But at the same time, he said, "we can join with environmentalists on a range of policy issues."

The TCU is one of the oldest unions in the United States, with approximately 46,000 members, many of whom are railroad workers.

The transport sector is responsible for 13 percent of total global greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Road transport emits 10 percent of the global total, according to a document titled "Transport Workers and Climate Change: Towards Sustainable Low-Carbon Mobility", presented and discussed at Wednesday's special one-day conference.

Carbon dioxide (CO2) is one of the main greenhouse gases, and 23 percent of CO2 emissions from fossil fuel combustion comes from transport activities. Road transport, again, is the largest contributor, according to the report.

"Transport emissions are growing faster than in any other sector. Therefore, it is important to take actions towards mitigation and adaptation," Lara Skinner and Sean Sweeney, researchers at the Global Labour Institute (GLI) at Cornell University in the U.S., who attended the conference, told IPS in a statement.

The ITF Climate Change Working Group and the GLI worked together to prepare the report specifically for this international conference. It addresses issues like emissions reductions, promoting public transport, creating quality jobs, technological change, and the social changes required for more rational, greener transport policies.

The experts propose using the "reduce-shift-improve" strategy, which combines actions to curtail emissions, changes towards more sustainable forms of transport and improvements in fuel and energy efficiency.

"Transport is one of the most serious problems. However, it is not the root problem, but one effect of global patterns of production and consumption of goods and services," Asbjorn Wahl, the Norwegian chair of the ITF Climate Change Working Group, told IPS.

Low transport costs that do not fully reflect pollution, high mobility of goods and people, increasing car use and an emphasis on land transport are behind rising greenhouse gas emissions, according to the 55-page document.

The ITF Executive Committee decided not to present the report on climate change as an ITF

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policy statement, although this had been the original plan.

Instead, the four-yearly ITF Congress, which opened Thursday, will vote on three resolutions proposed by the conference, which if passed will be binding for the organisation and its policies over the next four years.

Motion One is the most ambitious of the three, and already has the backing of 51 unions from around the world. This proposal adopts the "reduce-shift-improve" strategy for the transport sector.

However, it insists that the ITF "will never accept a transition to a low-carbon society that takes place through increased unemployment and the undermining of wages and working conditions" for transport workers.

"There are conditions for alternative transportation, but we are developing countries," Zeleke Mena and Zerihon Alemu, representing the Ethiopian Transport and Communications Workers' Trade Union Industrial Federation, told IPS in a statement.

Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa, with a population of five million, has over 1,100 buses providing public and private transport, and 12,000 taxis. In 2008 the local government added two electric vehicles to the fleet. "People need transportation and what exists is not enough," the delegates said.

The report by ITF, which represents 4.6 million workers worldwide, recommends a moratorium on transport liberalisation (deregulation and internationalisation), greater use of high-speed trains instead of airplanes, and increasing the energy efficiency of transport methods and vehicles through technological advances.

Studies of "reduce-shift-improve" policies suggest that more transport jobs will be created than lost by these policies, the report says, although it predicts that changes in existing jobs and potential job losses may occur.

"We must be leaders in protecting today's transport jobs, and in creating new jobs in collective passenger transport and other clean modalities. Our first responsibility is to defend our members' jobs and standard of living," Scardelletti said.

Mexico releases 715.3 million tonnes of CO2 a year into the atmosphere, with transport contributing some 134 million tonnes, according to government statistics.

Sixty percent of Mexico's total emissions arise from energy production and consumption, including transport, 14.4 percent is from waste management, 9.9 percent from deforestation, 8.9 percent from industry and 6.4 percent from agriculture. (END)

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