

Working in a Warming World: On Climate Change and Union Renewal with Carla Lipsig-Mummé

Christina Rousseau

Christina Rousseau¹ (CR): Despite the changing face and composition of the labour force, the organized labour movement (i.e. unions) has grown stagnant in its responses to austerity measures against working class people, a shrinking job market, and the erosion of unions themselves. Running parallel to the issue of union renewal and attacks against working class people is the issue of climate change. As your recent work suggests, climate change and union renewal are not necessarily parallel, and are, in fact, connected as a broad range of issues facing workers in Canada and across the globe. Can you elaborate on this connection?

Carla Lipsig-Mummé² (CLM): It seems to me not only are they not just parallel, but they feed each other and they can create each other. I saw this when I was living and working in Australia, where I was a national councilor for the National Tertiary Education Union, which are blue-collar and white-collar workers together. They bargained nationally – and we had enterprise, or workplace bargaining, as well. My state

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of Victoria asked me to head a committee that they were setting up on green campaigning. We had representatives from each one of the universities in Victoria, and then it became a national effort, and in a very short period of time we pulled together material and the language for collective bargaining around climate change. There were basically a series of issues that emerged, and ways of bargaining as well. More than that, all the locals participated.

What people were reporting back was interesting: at various universities, young people (in their early 20s) who had never come to a union meeting (and they might be science people, they might be techs, they might be grounds people because academics were not separated out) came for the environment issues and came out of a concern for environmental questions. One of the three people who put their hands up to take my place on the council when I left later became state secretary of the National Tertiary – and now he is a major force in the Australian Council of Trade Unions, doing serious work for environmental change. By this I mean the unions and the corporations argue a very fine line in policy statements, as indeed do many environment groups.

The policy statements usually have a target on either consumer behaviour, or on what regulations or laws we need from the government. All of this is what others can do. I'm suggesting that unions have considerable residual powers through occupational health and safety and collective bargaining that will allow them to raise issues of environmental responsibility. Through their collective bargaining, for example, they can draw in people who haven't been active before. The link between occupational health and safety and collective bargaining will mobilize people who would surprise you, and people who wouldn't surprise you. I think that engagement with environmental responsibility is one of several sources for union renewal, mainly at the local level. This is rank and file work. It can gather, and it has to. And what could reinvigorate unions more than engagement with bargaining? We need to build from the rank and file, because that's where we negotiate.

Another thing I learned from my Australian experience (and I've seen this in Germany as well) is that environmental work in a workplace sometimes begins with one or two people who are passionate in gathering others. I listened to a series of secondary and tech college teachers in southern Germany talking about how they got active. One teacher had talked to their students and together they formed a group in one class, then other classes did. They started out by asking, "What are we wasting? How is our energy being used?" And they formed other clus-

ters – this is real rank and file work. What you can't ever do is present it as a means to a different end, because the people who come to this really care about the environment, and they care about their unions too.

There are other ways to link union renewal and climate change, which we haven't done yet, but which we may with Work in a Warming World³. In a hospital you may have eleven different unions. At York University we have seven, I believe. Gather a delegate from each one of those unions and call them your green stewards. Or they could be your existing occupational health and safety officers. You can learn how to audit a workplace and not accept the employer's evaluation. Because if you accept the employer's evaluation, every one of the universities is environmentally superb! And we're not. So you gather this information, and you connect with concerned scientists and environmental lawyers, and you get the tools for auditing and drafting your proposals. But you also draw up a green plan where you develop what we need to do, what our timeframe is, what expertise is needed, etc. That idea – which could be somewhat common across workplaces and sectors – is to have a small group that's interested in green issues.

CR: There is a lot of talk about the creation of green jobs. What does this mean?

CLM: What's a green job? Governments look at the issue and say, "We'll create 2 million, 3 million, 4 million jobs." But there's no consensual definition of green jobs. The idea of green jobs is used largely as a lure – it's basically job creation with a trendy title. We will produce *X* number of jobs, and the numbers are never the same. These new green jobs are based on a series of hypotheses: *if* this law passes, *if* the shift to cleaner energy occurs within a certain amount of time, *if, if*.

It seems to me that in defining green jobs we need to have 2 or 3 characteristics: 1) The item being produced is of environmental value to better it, and not simply keep it equal; 2) The methods of production are themselves environmentally responsible; 3) The workers have green awareness and green training. But what does it mean to say the processes

3 Work in a Warming World (W3) "is a 5 year research programme clustering a number of projects and grants. It is a research partnership among academics and community partners to bring work back into Canadian focus in the struggle to slow global warming. The cluster of W3 projects bridge two solitudes: between environmental and labour market organizations, and between academic and practitioner research. W3 brings together more than 50 organizations and researchers in 10 universities and 4 countries." For more information, see <http://www.workinawarmingworld.yorku.ca/>

of production? I argue that we need to start to use a life cycle assessment: we start with the inputs, we come to the technology we use to transport, the physical environment in which your work takes place, distribution, disposal. It's a chain. Once you do that, once you consider these factors, there are precious few green industries and green processes.

The number of green jobs obviously varies. And worse than that, very few new green jobs are actually being created. In the last month, Gretchen Morgenson of *The New York Times* looked at this. The United States has a series of programs to fund small and medium sized businesses to hire people who are working on environmental responsibility. She followed some of the companies and found that they took the money, but the jobs never came. We don't have any consensus on the issue of green jobs, other than that it is a political tool. All policies, whether to create green jobs or to regulate existing jobs – are vulnerable to politics. We're not that vulnerable yet in Canada. So far, our labour relations framework has stood up better than other countries. I know the Conservatives are now looking for Right to Work legislation, so maybe we aren't going to hold up. But so far we do: we have contracts, we have bargaining, we have occupational health and safety laws that are independent of our contracts, etc. And can it all get wiped out? Sure it can. And so can our unions. But right now we have powers we're not using, and they just might renew us.

CR: In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis and as a response to Canadians demanding environmental accountability, the Canadian government has promised the creation of “green” jobs. The reality in Canada, however, is that resources are going to support environmentally destructive practices like fracking and the oil sands industry (not to mention the Canadian government completely abandoning its Kyoto commitments). It seems that people in Canada are interested in green jobs – or at least in greening existing jobs. But instead resources are going to support environmentally devastating industries and practices. Why is Canada so stalled compared to other developed countries? How does the Canadian labour movement compare with other countries in its response?

CLM: In Canada, we're still around 30 percent unionized – the US is around 11 percent. If I had my druthers, we wouldn't be going workplace to workplace. But we don't have the government in our hands. I don't reject the NDP out of hand because having lived in Australia when the conservative coalition came into power. The government at

the national level completely got rid of protective elements; all dues collection was by hand, you couldn't collect it at the source any longer. The federal government said repeatedly, "Our goal is for every worker to be a self-employed contractor." Union membership in Australia went from 56 percent down to 21 percent. Unions had no money to have offices or staff.

There are a number of initiatives that are good within the union movement as a whole. But the harder issues, which happen around collective bargaining, are very rare. Is there good will in the movement? Absolutely (especially in British Columbia). We need to get back the right to bargain in the public sector, because we almost don't have it anymore. I've watched the labour movement engage in the past, and it has been very promising. It hasn't been quick, but it's been promising. For example, the United Food and Commercial Workers union, organized greenhouse workers who are almost always migrants. They understand the contradictions: from field, to truck, to factories, to fork – there's a whole political economy. I'm waiting to see not just the unions, but also the environmental movement, go beyond the proposal of policies to make the changes happen. We've seen a little of that, but not much – and we do have the places and the spaces to do so. There are things we can bargain, and also ways we can bargain. We developed this in Australia, and it works almost everywhere: 1) What are you negotiating to demand the employer to do?; 2) What are you prepared to do jointly with the employer (create a joint commission in which you and the employer oversee a whole range of things, e.g., the heating plant, etc.); 3) What you will negotiate into your collective agreement to have the employer do for your members as citizens in civil society? Free metro passes, for example. Hotel workers in Toronto have negotiated that for their workers; 4) We as a union are going to educate our members as part of our collective bargaining responsibility. That's new. We take on the education. It goes through every sector, and that could be part of the green plan. These are the ways you can bargain, and they are doable.

How does it compare to other countries? The European unions are way ahead. They've been on social partnership for years. They have a tripartite hold that works against conservative governments. For example, there was a partnership to create cleaner steel. The Green Workplaces project in the UK is something I would love to borrow for here. There are between 300-350 companies building relationships workplace by workplace to green, consult and negotiate. That's a model I would like to see us get involved with. It's workplace based, but it's Trade Union Congress enabled. There are lots of other examples as well. Codetermi-

nation in Germany will do something like this too. Codetermination gives unions enormous research capacity. Board fees pay for research centers, when union members sit on company boards. The fees do not go into their pockets, but into this. European unions, when they have money – and the Quebec unions do this too – put money into research so that when they go to the table or into the strike, they have backup. And we have never done that here, nor do I see the climate for it now.

Compared to what we do vis-à-vis the government, you might ask why Canadians who are concerned about the environment continue to reelect a government which is the pariah of the Western world, although it's about to be joined by Australia.

CR: The reality is that people working in environmentally destructive industries like the oil and mining industries in Canada are working these jobs because they earn them money. How can we get these workers to care about environmental responsibility when they have a pay cheque to think about?

CLM: We can ask the same question in many places. If you have chronically poor communities, in the Maritimes or in the Atlantic provinces for example, they're going to migrate. I've been talking with a group that is looking at an alternative skills training program. My thought is that you create regional instead of provincial labour markets, because then you may at least keep them somewhere in the Atlantic. Well before we got into climate change, there was a skills training problem: we never solved it, and we keep asking the same questions 20 years later. There is a dilemma of personal need.

I think that we often forget in universities that everybody doesn't have the range of choices that we do. For example, if you come from an outpost, if you come from a fishing community where fish are gone, your choices are made in function of a lot of pressures. If we stay students for a long time (as I did), then you can underestimate the perception of no choice. I would only be contacting these workers through their union. Coming from the outside in some industries never works. Above all, we have a number of things that are not climate but that are linked and related. For example, the Canadian government's scandalous negligence: piping, or rail carrying of the oil sands, the lack of rail standards, and the dangers attached to them, etc. All kinds of people who work in those and other kinds of industries can gather around that. Gathering around issues that are not climate change in the workplace, but are envi-

ronmental so that the links may also happen elsewhere the community. That doesn't take you to a practice – the idea of green plans or environmentally responsible charter for workers in their workplaces. Those are places that we can't go to from the outside.

In *Climate@Work* we write about what we are doing with unions and what unions are doing in the workplace⁴. In some ways it's not part of our academic writing. I think when we cluster stories better that may happen. But it's a different kind of work for us.

CR: There have been a lot of grassroots responses to environmental devastation and climate change in Canada. For example, the anti-fracking movement in New Brunswick by Mi'kmaq warriors and the Elsipogtog First Nations in response to shale-gas exploration in the area, recently culminating in a massive blockade and the proclamation of a massive land reclamation. This is, of course, one example of environmental activism coming from First Nations and indigenous people in Canada. I was recently at my union's national convention (Canadian Union of Public Employees), where an emergency resolution was passed in support of the Elsipogtog First Nations. On a national level, with my union, it seems to have ended there.

CLM: CUPE has environment committees in 130 different locals. They're probably not doing "nothing". CUPE is very decentralized in this way. I always know that they're doing more than what I know about. We have something called a *Work and Climate Change Report*, which is a compendium of worldwide research – it comes out monthly, and it's free. It's a straight thing. You go to it if you want to know what is happening. You don't often find stuff about mobilization. It's geared for what it does, which is gather people who you could otherwise never talk with and give them information and hope they use it. We work on a number of different levels and with several different goals inside this work.

CR: Can you talk about the connections between unions and grassroots movements? How do they compare, and how can they respond to climate change and environmental devastation in a meaningful way?

CLM: Different ways in different parts of the country. I would say by responding to environmental degradation. Given what we're getting out of the Harper government, concern about climate change has moved into

4 Carla Lipsig-Mummé, ed. (2013). *Climate@Work*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

a larger concern about the environment as a dangerous thing because of the way the government deals with it. British Columbia would be far in advance of everyone else on this. British Columbia will say it's an unwritten rule that nobody goes forward anymore with an environmentally destructive plan if the First Nations don't want it. Across the whole country, I don't know what local links are made.

Local bargaining isn't happening really. We've got examples of things included in contracts – there are clauses, and there are more than we know. But there is not awareness that there is a lot out there. We know there's more than we know, but until we get a good search engine or even a federal system, we put it together bit by bit. What it means is, in terms of actual awareness, people pick up the spark and bring it home to their locals – and those are the things we'll be looking at with Work in a Warming World with another seven years of funding. I'd like to be moving into the local work sooner than that.

CR: So the work is something that is happening more at a local level than at the national level in unions?

CLM: When we've talked with people in packed rooms, few talked about what they were bargaining. They talked about what they were doing with their occupational health and safety committee, or talked about separate environment committees. But I didn't hear about bargaining in that room. That's the next step. In any place that it hasn't already started, they really have to be starting from the ground. Because quintessentially what we do in this country is we bargain from the local level. We can provide some of the material, the information; find out what they need to help. And it helps a lot that we have these good unions, and unions that are largely good in terms of listening to their locals and taking up the work of Work in a Warming World. In other words, they are taking up the work of Work in a Warming World and that helps too. But it's a long way to go.

CR: According to a Statistics Canada report from 2012, the percentage of workers in unionized positions is 31.2 percent compared to 33.8 percent in 1997.

CLM: How lucky we are that we only dropped 2 percent! But yes, precarious jobs are a killer in making any kind of unionized force.

CR: While union membership has grown in this period, there has been a greater growth of non-unionized jobs: precarious, temporary, part-time work. The major issue for a lot of these workers is job security. Additionally, the public sector has largely lost the right to collective bargaining. With the impending threat of “Right to Work” legislation, what are we to do? How can workers be integrated into struggles not only for better, secure jobs, but also for environmental protection and opposing climate change?

CLM: We do things that will sound very much reformist. We ensure the government that wants to do this is not in office again. But there is a whole active and confrontational life for unions, which somehow nationally has disappeared since 2000. The Canadian Labour Congress under Bob White was extraordinarily creative in not letting these things take root. Leadership, to some degree, matters. If nothing else, it matters if only in terms of despair or the willingness to fight. That willingness to fight – and I’m talking about climate bargaining at the local level and the mood of the labour movement as a whole – has been taking a giant step backwards; a step of resignation for a very long time. That needs to change. And that means getting involved with political parties that can stop the party that won’t. In other words, it needs a certain kind of reformist political action.

CR: Do you see a place for returning to the roots of the labour movement, which was built out of nothing, and out of militancy and illegitimacy?

CLM: It grew out of itself and out of the chances people took with their own lives and with the lives of others. Do I see it? I haven’t seen it yet. Labour as a social movement fought for the legal right to continue to represent and bargain. The price you pay to get the right to bargain is to lose the social movement. On the other hand, if we lose the right to bargain, we have to start right back again. Where do I see it coming from? I see it coming from workers. Fast food workers and minimum wage workers in the United States are doing quite spectacular work, and I don’t think we’re seeing that here. Now we’re not talking about climate. We’re talking about the simple role of the union as defender and an advancer of social rights and social power. In other words, we’re talking about something in which climate is only a part. I haven’t seen anything here that is like what the fast food workers in the United States are doing. And it’s not just them. The day labourers are enormously

organized in the United States. What we're talking about is: does the United States of the 1930s happen again? And the answer is: lose our basic rights and there are certainly people of several generations willing to fight back. That's *politique de la pire* – in other words, we will become radical if it gets a lot worse. I'm not hoping so; I'm hoping it gets better. But that's the only place I can see it coming from. If we're talking about union radicalism again, I think it will take us getting to a moment where we understand that we have everything and all to lose. Then I have a certain amount of faith in several generations for that fight back. But that means that it needs to get desperately worse, and it's hard to wish that.