

We Must Act for an Environmentally Sustainable Future

An Introduction

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

We Must Act for an Environmentally Sustainable Future

When the last tree is cut, the last fish is caught, and the last river is polluted; when to breathe the air is sickening, you will realize, too late, that wealth is not in bank accounts and that you can't eat money.

— Alanis Obomsawin, Abenaki filmmaker, singer, artist, and activist

The 2018 wildfire season was possibly Canada's worst on record. It certainly was for British Columbia, with a state of emergency called in the province in August of 2018.¹ Unfortunately, the previous year, 2017, had been the worst wildfire season in BC history.

This is not a problem unique to Canada. Last year, after possibly its worst fire season ever, researchers in California started discussing the possibility of there no longer being a fire season but a state of permanent alert. Jerry Brown, then governor of California, when speaking to the media, said that climate change has made the wildfire situation "part of our ordinary experience."

On average, Canada sees about 2.5 million hectares—an area roughly half the size of Nova Scotia—burn every year due to wildfires. The size of the land area subject to fire has more than doubled since the 1970s.

There is no doubt that climate change has played a role in the increased intensity of global wildfires. According to Megan Kirchmeier-Young, a research scientist at Environment and Climate Change Canada, "as the climate continues to warm, we can expect that costly extreme wildfire seasons—like 2017, in BC—will become more likely in the future. This will have increasing impacts on many sectors, including forest management, public health, and infrastructure."² There are undoubtedly other factors that make the 2018 season the worst on record; however, we cannot deny that human-induced climate change is the greatest single contributing factor.

This paper starts by looking at the problem of wildfires for a couple of reasons. First of all, the issue most dramatically brings home the threat that we face from failing to deal with human-induced climate change. The science is in, and we are seeing the impact on our communities and on our forests. There is no doubt that climate change may be the greatest threat to human societies ever!

But there is another reason that we, as a public sector union, want to start the discussion by looking at the crisis of wildfires in our forests: our members. It is our wildland firefighters who, risking their own lives, go into those forests to try and protect wildlands. It is our emergency response workers who help to save lives. It is our public

sector workers who notify and evacuate communities, provide food, accommodation, and medical assistance, and who coordinate the thousands of people who step forward to assist.

This issue of extreme wildfires also highlights the glaring inequalities that are inherent in the growing climate crisis. In the midst of the horrific California wildfire season, it was discovered that very wealthy individuals were paying for extra protection for their homes.

Global income inequality has both accelerated the pace of human-induced climate change and ensured that climate change itself will have unequal impacts, with the world's poor, marginalized, and vulnerable populations bearing the brunt of its effects.

While human-induced climate change may be the single greatest environmental crisis of our time, it is unfortunately not the only one we face. There are numerous serious problems confronting humanity on this beautiful little blue ball, including air pollution, deforestation, ocean pollution, mass extinction, and soil nutrient depletion. Given the nature of our planet, these issues are, of course, interrelated.

In the face of these environmental crises, the National Union cannot—must not— sit idly by. We have an obligation to act for ourselves and all future generations.

However, we must not respond to the climate crisis with further austerity measures. Instead, we envision an environmentally sustainable future with a greater, more robust public sector. We envision a future with more people working in meaningful occupations that restore our environment and strengthen our communities.

We are asking our members to join us!

¹ <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/b-c-wildfires-2018-state-of-emergency-declared-across-province-as-566-fires-burn>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/news/2019/01/canadas-scientists-conclude-that-human-induced-climate-change-had-a-strong-impact-on-forest-fires-in-british-columbia.html>



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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