

We Must Act  
for an  
Environmentally  
Sustainable  
Future

**Governments Must Take  
Action**

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

## Governments Must Take Action

The scope of the world's environmental problems can seem overwhelming. As we have seen, there are many serious problems confronting humanity: air pollution, deforestation, ocean pollution, mass extinction, and soil nutrient depletion. All of these issues are, of course, interrelated. The sheer size and urgency of the problem requires a concerted and united effort to address it.

Unfortunately, all too often the prescriptions provided to people place the onus too much on individual behaviours and actions. "If only people would drive their cars less, eat less (or no) meat, carry reusable shopping bags, lower their thermostats," and etc. Not that these actions are not laudable in their own right. However, they are clearly insufficient to the challenges facing us.

Interestingly, this insight is coming to be widely accepted—even in some surprising places. A recent article in the Harvard Business Review (not known for its environmental coverage, or receptiveness to activism) contained the following:

A number of CEOs are realizing that such expectations cannot be met by innovation and voluntary actions alone. The scale of today's social and environmental challenges requires government action, too—there are some ways in which public policy can drive change that cannot be achieved otherwise.

In some cases, regulatory change can lead to direct commercial benefit, creating markets that didn't exist before, or handing competitive advantage to those better able to capitalize on the regulatory change. For many companies, the right solutions are available for tackling social and environmental challenges, but they don't become commercially viable unless regulatory change aligns commercial incentives with the right thing to do.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, the ingenuity and creativity of humanity are awe inspiring. The resources available to us today are greater than at any time in human history. As a global community, we need to rise to the challenges confronting us. Our governments must respond to the will of the overwhelming majority of people who want a sustainable future for the generations to come.

In a world that can spend \$1.6 trillion annually on the weapons of war, it is inconceivable that the money and resources necessary to defending life on the planet are not made available. Indeed, the costs of inaction are beginning to exceed the cost of addressing the problem. According to UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina J. Mohammed:

We spend \$5 trillion a year on healthcare because of air pollution. Yet investing that in the kind of technologically and commercially viable solutions already available would

slow, perhaps even reverse, our ever-decreasing cycles of poverty and vulnerability. In doing so, we would not only improve health and create decent jobs, we would create more stable communities and more sustainable economic growth.<sup>2</sup>

It is going to take an incredible effort to change course. Only governments are able to provide the necessary focus, policy change, and resources to respond to the challenges confronting us.

We need governments who are willing to enact laws and regulations that will

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- Cut the use of plastics and disposables
- Promote zero-emissions vehicles, including cars, buses, trains, and ferries
- End subsidies to polluting industries
- Force companies to scrub pollutants out of their emissions
- Promote soil preservation measures and
- Promote forestry protection and food sovereignty
- Protect the right of Canadians, including workers, to a healthy environment

And, in a more proactive nature, we need government investment into

- Renewable and sustainable energy resources
- Energy independence
- A comprehensive and widespread program of reforestation
- Protecting water as a human right
- Ending the privatization of environmental protections and enforcement
- Expanding infrastructure to assist with green alternatives
- Green jobs
- A just transition program for workers displaced in the shift to a green economy, ensuring green jobs are good jobs, and
- Programs to address inequality and environmental racism

The reality is that these policies will improve the lives of all Canadians. A better world is possible, and it can start here—with us!

As union activists, we know that governments usually need a good, hard push to do what is right and necessary, that far too often they are listening to corporate and moneyed interests at the expense of the majority. Already we have seen many federal and provincial governments backpedal on even the partial and insufficient environmental policies and steps that they have put forward.

Increasingly, conservative political parties are combining reactionary social policy with regressive environmental policies. As trade unionists, we must continue to oppose both of these tendencies. We know that the fight against discrimination and inequality is linked to the struggle for environmental sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2018/10/why-climate-change-and-other-global-problems-arepushing-some-business-leaders-to-embrace-regulation>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/4d93ac32-en.pdf?expires=1571170922&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=D3440039B602FFD311AC4ECC64D997CD>



## 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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