



Tackling the Climate Crisis—Towards a Just, Sustainable, and Public Future

2023





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 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.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

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Climate Action Matters to Working People

Climate Change Is Here

Climate change is arguably the biggest challenge we, as a society and as a world, face. Climate change is real: the science is unequivocal that climate change is caused by human activity.¹ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), made up of the world's leading climate scientists, has estimated that human activities—specifically, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions—have caused global warming of 1.0 °C above pre-industrial levels.² While it may seem like a small number, the effects are devastating.

Climate change is not a distant threat. It is here and already having devastating impacts on our ecosystems and communities.³ Canada is experiencing warming 2 times faster than the global average, and 3 times faster in the Arctic.⁴ In the last few years alone, there are countless examples of the impacts. Between severe wildfires and flooding, heat waves and drought, food insecurity, melting sea ice and permafrost, and air and water pollution, communities right across the country are experiencing the effects of climate change.

Workers and Communities on the Front Lines

The climate emergency is impacting workers in their jobs, as NUPGE members know first-hand. Our members include health care professionals caring for those affected by pollution and extreme weather. They include wildland firefighters facing longer and more severe seasons and highway maintenance workers repairing damaged roads. Then there are the social service workers providing care and support to the vulnerable populations affected disproportionately. In addition, there are the civil servants who are responsible for implementing environmental protections, keeping the public informed during crises, and carrying out various support programs for people. And there are many more examples.

Addressing the climate crisis matters to workers—as workers and as members of their communities. They are experiencing these effects and are worried about the future.

Not everyone is affected equally. The impacts of climate change disproportionately affect Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour (BIPOC), people with disabilities, women, people living in poverty or with low incomes, seniors, and youth. In doing so, the climate crisis threatens to make existing inequities worse, similar to what we have seen with the COVID-19 pandemic.

No Time to Waste

Inaction is not an option. The IPCC has warned that this decade is crucial for reducing emissions to prevent global warming from reaching catastrophic levels. Its latest report, which outlines the current and predicted impacts on ecosystems, human well-being, and the health of the planet, issues “a dire warning about the consequences of inaction.”

Under the 2015 Paris Agreement, countries agreed to cut emissions to limit global warming to 2 °C above pre-industrial levels, while aiming for a 1.5 °C limit. According to the United Nations Environment Program's (UNEP) Emissions Gap Report 2021,

new national climate pledges combined with other mitigation measures put the world on track for a global temperature rise of 2.7 °C by the end of the century. That is well above the goals of the Paris climate agreement and would lead to catastrophic changes in the Earth’s climate. To keep global warming below 1.5 °C this century, the aspirational goal of the Paris Agreement, *the world needs to halve annual greenhouse gas emissions in the next eight years* [emphasis added].⁵

People want action too. Several polls,⁶ including one commissioned by NUPGE during the 2021 federal election campaign,⁷ confirm that the overwhelming majority of Canadians want their governments to pursue stronger climate action. This includes fossil fuel workers, the majority of which support a transition to a net-zero economy and want to see training and other supports for workers.⁸ It is the world’s wealthy and powerful, including multinational corporations, that are trying to block climate action.⁹

We need governments to step up. Actions at the household, workplace, or community levels to reduce carbon footprints and foster sustainability are important. But we need structural change to address this crisis and transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy. We need governments to intervene to address the scale of this crisis through investing in the green economy, regulating corporations, and ensuring that nobody is left behind. All levels of government must also lead by example and reduce their own carbon footprints.

This backgrounder series focuses on the essential role of the public sector in this effort—in both responding to the effects of climate change and preventing it from getting worse.

An Environmental Justice Approach

The effects of climate change and environmental degradation do not affect everyone equally—both between and within countries. And we do not all contribute equally to climate change. Indeed, inequality and climate change stem from the same unequal, exploitative economic system. To understand the climate crisis, and to devise solutions, we need to start by recognizing this relationship.

Global Context

Economic inequality is a driving force of climate change. According to the Global Carbon Project, just 23 wealthy countries in the Global North are responsible for half of all historical CO₂ emissions, while over 150 countries are responsible for the other half.¹⁰ Canada is among the top 10 emitters, despite having only 0.5% of the world's population; hence the need for Canada and other wealthy countries to contribute their fair share of emissions reductions.¹¹

Countries in the Global South are experiencing the worst effects of climate change, such as hunger, rising sea levels, and displacement,¹² despite that they are less responsible for causing it. Wealthy countries in the Global North not only bear greater responsibility for the emissions that are causing climate change but they also have the means to transition to a green economy and to support those in the Global South in their efforts. The Paris Agreement incorporates this concept of equity as a guiding principle, recognizing parties have “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.”¹³

The uneven contributions to climate change are clear on an individual/class level as well. According to a 2020 report by Oxfam, the carbon emissions of the richest 1% are more than double the emissions of the 3.1 billion people that make up the world's poorest half.¹⁴ And we have seen that wealth inequality has only gotten worse during the pandemic.¹⁵ Meanwhile, people living in poverty are more vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change. Specifically, they are more likely to lose their livelihoods and to be displaced by extreme weather events.¹⁶

The relationship between climate change and income and wealth inequality is not a coincidence; they are inextricably linked.¹⁷ Therefore, efforts to combat the climate crisis must be linked to fighting inequality as well.

Environmental Racism

The unequal impacts of climate change are evident within countries too. The climate crisis has disproportionate impacts on BIPOC communities in Canada.

Environmental racism is

racial discrimination in the disproportionate location and greater exposure of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities to contamination and pollution from industry and other

environmentally hazardous activities; the lack of political power these communities have to fight back against the placement of these industries in their communities; the implementation of policies that allow these harmful projects to be placed in these communities; the slow rates of cleanup of contaminants and pollutants in these communities; and the lack of representation of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities in mainstream environmental groups and on decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.¹⁸

Environmental racism, a form of systemic racism, contributes to health inequities.¹⁹ Just one stark example is the location of Chemical Valley, a highly concentrated area of petrochemical refineries near Sarnia, Ontario, right beside Aamjiwnaang First Nation. The exposure to chemicals has threatened the health of the community's water, air, and residents.²⁰

Impacts on Vulnerable Populations

The climate crisis is posing disproportionate risks to people with disabilities, to seniors, and children. For example, a report by Human Rights Watch found that the extreme heat wave in BC in 2021 led to “profound mental and physical health impacts” on both people with disabilities and older people, who experience a higher risk of heat stress.²¹ The report also found that “inadequate government support compounded risks for people with disabilities and older people.”

During storms or floods, people with disabilities face barriers to evacuating, such as finding accessible transportation or services, and ensuring their health care or other services will follow them.²² This means that climate change responses need to consider the range of impacts and needs in the community.

Compounding Gender Inequality

Women, girls, and gender diverse people, especially those who are BIPOC, living in poverty, or living with disabilities, are more severely impacted by the climate crisis. During extreme weather, disasters, and displacement, they are more likely to experience loss of livelihood, economic insecurity, health issues, and death.²³ These events are also correlated with an increased risk of gender-based violence.²⁴

NUPGE's report, *Environmental and Climate Change: A Gender Perspective*, outlines these and other gendered impacts, as well as the importance of women and gender-diverse people's leadership in sustainability and climate action.

Climate Migrants

Climate change is forcing people from their communities. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees,

the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as abnormally heavy rainfall, prolonged droughts, desertification, environmental degradation, or sea-level rise and cyclones are already causing an average of more than 20 million people to leave their homes and move to other areas in their countries each year.²⁵

Canada is not immune. In 2020, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that 26,000 people in Canada were displaced due to disasters.²⁶

Climate change impacts, such as growing food and water insecurity, can also worsen living conditions, or make it harder for displaced people to return.²⁷ All of this increases the risk of conflict, another cause of displacement. Notably, people living in poverty are more likely to be displaced. This is an issue that warrants a global response.²⁸

Fighting for Environmental Justice

Without proactive intervention, the climate crisis will reinforce and exacerbate inequalities, as we have seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. The climate crisis and the inequality crisis are tied together. And so must the struggles for change be connected. This is the lens that has informed NUPGE's approach to environmental and climate issues, and it must continue to be.

We must push for climate action alongside our fights for anti-racism, Indigenous sovereignty, justice for people with disabilities, gender equality, refugee and migrant rights, etc. This approach also informs our advocacy for a Just Transition, or an energy transition that puts workers and communities at the centre, to which section 5 of this paper is devoted.

An environmental justice approach must also involve foregrounding the voices of the communities and workers who are on the front lines, and ensuring affected communities are empowered to lead the way on solutions.

Respecting Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty is particularly important, as NUPGE has written about.²⁹ Indigenous peoples have demonstrated how to live sustainably for generations, and they continue to be at the forefront of fights to protect the land, water, and ecosystems. And they are having an important impact. A recent study by the Indigenous Environmental Network found that Indigenous resistance to fossil fuel expansion in Canada and the US has stopped or delayed a large amount of GHG emissions—an amount equivalent to at least 25% of the annual US and Canadian emissions combined.³⁰ This underscores the importance of not just involving, but following the leadership of, those on the front lines.

Responding to the Climate Crisis with a Strong Public Sector

To tackle the climate crisis head on, we need ambitious, transformative action to transition to a lower-carbon economy and to ensure that no one is left behind. According to the IPCC, we need “immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions” in climate change-causing GHG emissions to keep the Paris goal within reach.³¹ In the release of its February 2022 report, the IPCC was clear: “half measures are no longer an option.”

The federal government under Trudeau has, to its credit, increased the level of ambition of Canada’s climate commitments: stronger emissions reduction targets,³² increased contribution to global climate finance,³³ and investment in areas like green home retrofits and zero-emission vehicles.³⁴ But it still has not gone far enough.

The government’s approach has been described as a “one eye shut” approach.³⁵ Despite a strengthening of policies and some gains made in climate action, that progress is offset by continued support for the fossil fuel industry, as emissions from the oil and gas sector have continued to rise.³⁶ This is illustrated by the corporate tax credit for carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) that was a major piece of the 2022 budget. CCUS has been criticized by academics and environmentalists, and even a former oil executive, as an unreliable and expensive technology that will only reinforce our dependence on fossil fuels.³⁷ The tax credit was seen as just another subsidy to fossil fuel companies.³⁸

Researchers have also pointed out that, instead of stronger regulation, the federal climate plan focuses on incentives for industry, consumers, and home owners, which are insufficient for discouraging investment in fossil fuel infrastructure.³⁹ They also tend to benefit more affluent households. Some of these technologies are cost prohibitive to many workers and households. Governments need to ensure that green technologies, infrastructure, and programs are affordable and accessible for all people, not just for the wealthy and not just for those who own their own homes.

Tackling the climate crisis also requires cooperation across borders and levels of government. The commitment and actions taken at the provincial/territorial level vary considerably across the country. However, a recent analysis by the Pembina Institute found that not a single province or territory is prepared to deliver on climate action.⁴⁰

Despite federal targets for 2030 and 2050, half of Canada’s emissions (those from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) are not covered by a provincial or territorial 2030 target, and almost 75% of national emissions (from Alberta, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) are not covered by a 2050 target. The Pembina report also finds that none of the oil- and gas-producing provinces are adequately preparing for the decline of production with Just Transition plans, and no jurisdiction is using all of the available policy tools to lower transportation emissions. Oil and gas production and transportation are the 2 sectors driving emissions growth.⁴¹

Governments need to step up their game, and they need to do it fast. The public sector is uniquely positioned to respond. The public sector has an important role to play in both

mitigating, and *adapting to*, climate change. These processes must go together, but addressing each in turn can help us think about the many roles of the public sector.

The World Wildlife Fund describes these distinct but interrelated terms as follows:

Climate change mitigation means avoiding and reducing emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to prevent the planet from warming to more extreme temperatures. *Climate change adaptation* means altering our behavior, systems, and—in some cases—ways of life to protect our families, our economies, and the environment in which we live from the impacts of climate change. The more we reduce emissions right now, the easier it will be to adapt to the changes we can no longer avoid.⁴²

The Public Sector as a Vehicle for Mitigation

The science is clear that we need to drastically and rapidly reduce GHG emissions. This will require a whole-of-economy approach. The public sector is uniquely positioned to intervene and, in doing so, can be a proactive agent of change by facilitating the transition, rather than by simply reacting or picking up the pieces.

Major roles for governments are to invest and to regulate. The federal government, with its provincial, territorial, and municipal counterparts, needs to invest in renewable energy, sustainable infrastructure, and green transportation, and ensure they are delivered through a strong public sector. Governments can also implement regulations on industries and institutions, such as requirements for green building codes, emissions caps, and green procurement.

In 2021, NUPGE joined labour organizations from around the world in endorsing the Trade Union Program for a Public, Low-Carbon Energy Future.⁴³ Neoliberal climate and energy policies tied to privatization and commodification have failed to stop the rise of GHG emissions. The Trade Union Program emphasizes the importance of public energy systems to ensure the energy transition is socially just, economically viable, and effective in reaching climate goals.

Governments also need to support the retrofitting of buildings and other infrastructure. The energy required to run buildings, including our homes and workplaces, accounts for about 20% of Canada's annual carbon emissions.⁴⁴ Energy efficient buildings will help to reduce emissions, make life more affordable, and will support green jobs.⁴⁵ Governments need to change regulations, policies, and building codes to support retrofits.⁴⁶ They can offer programs to make them affordable and accessible. Governments can also require that all new buildings be energy efficient—and they can fund it, such as through green social housing.⁴⁷ Canada needs a long-term strategy to decarbonize our buildings.⁴⁸ Governments have a responsibility to ensure that all people have access to climate-friendly technology and infrastructure, regardless of where they live or their income level.

Another important area is improving public transit so that people have realistic alternatives to driving. But chronic under-investment means that public transit systems in Canadian cities are decades behind where they need to be, and transit service in smaller communities is limited or nonexistent. The federal government must be willing to fund a much greater share of transit infrastructure and operating costs.

It is important that the infrastructure and services needed to reduce GHG emissions be publicly procured, owned, maintained, and operated. In the long-term, public delivery of services and infrastructure is the best use of public funds and brings greater accountability and transparency.

Indeed, according to privatization researchers, privatization is fueling the climate crisis:

When it comes to the threat of climate change, public control over policy making is critical. Private forces guided by profit-motive, like fossil fuel companies, may seek to enrich shareholders at the risk of causing catastrophic environmental impacts. As such, privatization deals in the realm of climate hand over decision-making from the public, which stands to face the consequences of these impacts, to the profiteers who benefit from them. That's an untenable situation if we hope to build an environmentally sustainable future where everyone is afforded the right to a healthy planet.⁴⁹

Privatization has also been shown to reduce the quality of public services and contribute to worsening economic inequality.⁵⁰

Governments may say they can't afford to invest in ambitious climate action and that it should be left to the market and private companies. But it is clear that privatization and tax breaks for the wealthy have failed. It's the state that is uniquely positioned to inject large sums of money into the economy and take on debt unlike individuals or businesses.⁵¹ What's more, we can't afford *not* to act.

In a 2022 report, the IPCC reported that the costs of climate change impacts in Canada have been increasing since 1983, from an average of \$0.4 billion to \$1.9 billion annually.⁵² For instance, the severe flooding in BC last year caused at least \$450 million in insured damage, according to the Insurance Bureau of Canada.⁵³ That was in addition to the roughly \$155 million in insured damage caused by the wildfires earlier in the year. And this does not account for the human cost, the impacts on livelihoods, the cost to entire ecosystems, and the disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, if governments were to implement fair taxation, for which there is clear public support, this would lead to new sources of revenue and help to tackle income and wealth inequality.

There is also the matter that Canada gives more public finance to the fossil fuel sector, per capita, than any other G20 country.⁵⁴ A recent report by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) found that provincial governments' fossil fuel subsidies in

the main fossil-fuel-producing provinces—Alberta, BC, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador—have reached levels that rival that of the federal government’s.⁵⁵

The federal government has committed to phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, which NUPGE has called for, but action remains to be seen. Also, provinces need to commit to phasing out fossil fuel subsidies. Governments should be redirecting that money to more environmentally sustainable sectors and to supporting workers and their communities that are affected by the transition.

The federal climate plan *A Healthy Environment and a Healthy Economy*, which was released in late 2020, commits \$15 billion to be invested in climate action.⁵⁶ On a per capita basis, this figure pales in comparison to what many European countries and the US are committing.⁵⁷ We need increased public investment in climate action to reduce emissions and foster a greener economy.

Public Services Help Us to Adapt

Decarbonizing the economy is essential. But, as UNEP’s *Adaptation Gap 2021* report demonstrates, “the need to adapt to the impacts of climate change already locked in are just as important.”⁵⁸ The report finds that, although countries are increasingly including adaptation in their climate plans and policies, more needs to be done in areas of planning, implementation, and financing. It is important to note that the cost of adaptation is 5 to 10 times higher in the Global South than the current amount of financing, to which wealthy countries like Canada should contribute their fair share.⁵⁹

As noted above, public services, and the workers who deliver them, are on the front lines in a crisis. They are directly responding to the effects of climate change, keeping their communities safe and supported, and continuing to deliver critical services through it all. From providing care and emergency response, to repairing infrastructure, to coordinating it all, NUPGE members are in the thick of things.

Because these and other public services play a key role in responding to the effects of the climate crisis, which are projected to intensify, investing in expanding high-quality, inclusive, and universal public services will be a key part of climate change adaptation. Specifically, this will involve investing in public services like health care, social services, and disaster response and management, as well as in areas like energy, water, and public transportation. Public services can also offer good, green, and unionized jobs that sustain communities.

The Canadian government’s climate plan focuses on greening physical infrastructure, like buildings.⁶⁰ This is essential, as noted above. But investing in social infrastructure is also important for fostering a more sustainable and equitable economy. Investing in expanding and improving public services can not only help to tackle climate change, but also advance equality.⁶¹

Investing in public services also means investing in the workers who deliver these critical services. These workers deserve fair wages, benefits, pensions, and safe and healthy working conditions, as well as the resources they need to do their jobs. Workers’ rights

must be safeguarded, regardless of employment status, unionization status, or immigration status.

Furthermore, the workers in these sectors know what is needed to strengthen and adapt public services to respond to the crisis. And so, they must be at the decision-making tables. This is a crucial part of a Just Transition.

Reducing the Carbon Footprint of the Public Sector

In addition to the role of the public sector in supporting mitigation across the economy and adaptation in communities, the public sector also has a role to play in reducing its *own* environmental impacts. All sectors of the economy will be affected by climate change and will need to undergo a transition. The public sector is no exception—its institutions and services must also be part of the transition to a green economy. In fact, the public sector can be a leader in this regard.

In the UK, public services as a whole (excluding transport) represent about 8% of the UK's direct greenhouse gas emissions, according to a report by UNISON.⁶² The National Health Service (NHS) alone represents about 4% of the UK's emissions. UNISON notes that, if you account for procurement, construction, and social housing, the impact of public services is even greater. The government has set targets for emissions reductions in the public sector, and the NHS has said it will reach net zero emissions by 2040.

The emissions of the health care sector, in particular, received international attention during COP26 in 2021. Globally, the health sector accounts for approximately 4.6% of GHG emissions.⁶³ Canada was among the countries to sign onto the COP26 Health Programme, which outlines a commitment to developing climate-resilient and low-carbon health systems.⁶⁴ Notably, though, Canada did not commit to reaching net-zero emissions in the health system, as some other countries have.⁶⁵

In Canada, health care is responsible for 4.6% of our total GHG emissions, according to *The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change* report from 2019.⁶⁶ Compared to the health care sectors in 47 countries, Canada has the third-highest per capita emissions. And yet, the 2021 Lancet report found that only 3% of all federal climate adaptation funding since 2017 has been designated to health-related projects.⁶⁷

In Canada, there is publicly available data on greenhouse gas emissions—overall, by sector, and by province or territory. The federal government releases information on the GHG emissions of federal organizations,⁶⁸ but provinces don't necessarily do the same. It is, therefore, difficult to estimate the role of the provincial public sector from national data by sector (e.g., buildings or transportation). This is an area for further research.

The province of BC does release data on the emissions of its public sector organizations (PSOs).⁶⁹ In 2013, Ontario public agencies became required to report their annual energy use and GHG emissions.⁷⁰ However, there does not appear to be data reported since 2018.

The public sector has a role to play in the transition to a greener economy by decarbonizing public services and organizations themselves. Here we have just focused on the aspect of GHG emissions, but public services have other impacts on the environment too, such as producing waste and as consumers of energy.

In all of these efforts, it is crucial that public sector workers be at the table in determining how to reduce emissions and, more broadly, transition to a more sustainable future. This is

not only because they will be impacted but also because they have valuable expertise in their jobs and sectors.

A Just Transition for All Workers and Their Communities

A Just Transition is a core part of meaningful action on climate change. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines Just Transition as

greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. A Just Transition involves maximizing the social and economic opportunities of climate action, while minimizing and carefully managing any challenges.⁷¹

It bears repeating that both processes—minimizing the challenges and maximizing the opportunities—of the transition to a green economy are necessary. But it is worth emphasizing that there are opportunities in tackling the climate crisis—for job creation, for diversifying our economy, and for building a more resilient and sustainable economy.

Just Transition is often discussed in the context of an energy transition and the workers in this sector. That is because energy transitions—away from a fossil-fuel-based economy and to one based in renewable energy—are necessary. But it is not a given that the process will be just. In solidarity with workers in this industry, NUPGE has long supported the call for a Just Transition to ensure those workers have new opportunities and the supports they need.

Just Transition applies to other sectors too. Decarbonizing our economy will affect all workers in communities that depend on the fossil fuel industry, such as those employed in food services, accommodation, retail, and health care. Furthermore, Just Transition refers to a broader economic transition to a more sustainable economy.

In this process, workers and unions need to be leading the way on determining what a Just Transition looks like in a particular workplace, sector, or region. What is known as *social dialogue*—among workers, employers, and governments—is an essential component of Just Transition.⁷² This doesn't mean a one-time consultation; it means that workers and their unions need to be at the table in every sector and at every step of the transition.

This was one of the clear messages in the final report of the Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities. Among the recommended principles for a Just Transition was worker participation at every stage of the transition.⁷³

Governments have a responsibility to intervene, convening dialogue with workers, industry, and communities, to ensure a managed transition that does not cast aside affected workers and communities.

This process of social dialogue must also include Indigenous peoples. Lessons can be learned from New Zealand, for example, where their Just Transition process has involved Maori representatives, world views, and values.⁷⁴

At a workplace level, workers and their unions can also demand to be part of these discussions through collective bargaining. For example, workers can bargain for joint workplace committees on the environment, similar to those on health and safety.⁷⁵

In terms of concrete policies and programs, a Just Transition will require investing in measures like income supports, training, career-planning advice, and maintenance of benefits and pensions for workers in affected industries. It should include financial bridging for older workers who choose to retire, ensuring they receive full pension credits. Related to training, Just Transition will require increased investment in our public education systems.

It is important that climate action, including Just Transition law and policies, explicitly and proactively incorporates equity. Otherwise, Just Transition measures run the risk of reproducing existing inequities or contributing to further marginalization. Research shows that this has happened with previous Just Transition policies.⁷⁶

In addition to a strong social safety net, we need proactive Just Transition policies to support building a green economy. This must involve workforce development and supports for communities, as well as policies to promote workforce diversification and inclusion. It also requires increased investment in public education systems.

Just Transition requires not piecemeal measures, but a coherent industrial strategy that creates good, green, and unionized jobs and sustainable communities. Broadly speaking, Just Transition is about a larger economic transformation that seeks to eradicate poverty, advance equity, and ensure decent work for all.⁷⁷ As outlined in the third backgrounder in this series, investing in public services is also important because of their role in responding to the effects of climate change, which are expected to intensify. Strong public services can also provide good, green, and unionized jobs for the future.

This vision of Just Transition is not a pipe dream. Research by the Centre for Future Work, which examined the Canadian labour market and energy transitions in other jurisdictions, found that a transition away from fossil fuels can happen without sacrificing secure livelihoods or strong job markets—if it is done through long-term planning, generous income supports and adjustment assistance, and strong commitments to creating alternative employment.⁷⁸

Although the transition understandably brings about a sense of fear and insecurity, workers do support a Just Transition. A 2021 poll commissioned by Iron & Earth, a worker-led organization, found that

- 88% of fossil fuel workers are interested in skills and training development for jobs in the clean economy.
- 80% support a national upskilling initiative.
- 69% are interested in switching to a career in the net-zero economy.⁷⁹

The Trudeau government has been promising legislation on Just Transition since 2019. NUPGE has been pressuring the federal government to enact Just Transition measures and legislation since 2019 and submitted recommendations to the consultation in 2021.

The government introduced the proposed *Canadian Sustainable Jobs Act* in June 2023. It is a framework bill, meaning it focuses on principles and on setting up the institutional structures to implement a Just Transition. It does not deal with government spending or with the actual measures needed for a Just Transition. At the time of writing, there is still the possibility of strengthening the act.

A report by the CCPA outlined what an ambitious Just Transition Act could look like.⁸⁰ It outlines the rights and principles that should underpin legislation. But it goes beyond these, outlining some of the programs that would facilitate a Just Transition, such as

- a Just Transition Benefit to support workers, and
- a Just Transition Training Fund to ensure access to employment in the low-carbon economy for historically marginalized groups.

It also identifies institutional mechanisms, like a Just Transition Commission to oversee and guide the process, a new Crown corporation to invest in job-creation projects, and a new federal-provincial/territorial Just Transition Transfer for new social programs.

We need the political will of governments to make Just Transition a reality. If governments are proactive, rather than reactive, tackling the climate crisis through a true Just Transition is an opportunity to build a more equitable and just society in the process.

Building a Better Future

The climate crisis presents an existential threat—to our communities, livelihoods, and planet. It is easy to feel hopeless in the face of the climate crisis. There are rising rates of so-called eco-anxiety, particularly amongst young people who face uncertain futures.

But it is not too late to act. We can all take actions in our households, workplaces, and communities to foster sustainability. And, when we work together, we can pressure our elected officials, employers, and businesses to step up to tackle the climate crisis. As a country, we can afford ambitious climate action and a Just Transition through a strong public sector. In fact, we can't afford not to.

What's more, the climate crisis presents an opportunity. Coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic recovery, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our economy, our workplaces, and our communities to become more economically, socially, and ecologically just and sustainable. This is not to dismiss the suffering and hardship that has happened and is to come. But, seeing as we have no choice but to face this crisis, we can see it as an opportunity to create change for the better.

It will be no small feat. But unions are no strangers to tough, uphill battles. We can draw on the expertise we have, members' experiences, and lessons from past struggles. We can also join together with our allies to realize the vision of a world that puts people and the planet before profits.

Notes

¹ “Facts about the climate emergency,” United Nations Environment Programme, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/climate-action/facts-about-climate-emergency>; “Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying – IPCC,” Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Press release, August 9, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>.

² IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*, Valérie Masson-Delmotte et al., eds, 2018, https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_High_Res.pdf.

³ See NUPGE’s backgrounder series, We Must Act for an Environmentally Sustainable Future.

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B.C. GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



CANADIAN UNION OF BREWERY AND GENERAL WORKERS



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF SASKATCHEWAN



MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS



MANITOBA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



NEW BRUNSWICK UNION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EMPLOYEES



NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR ASSOC. OF PUBLIC & PRIVATE EMPLOYEES



NOVA SCOTIA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES UNION



ONTARIO PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES UNION / SYNDICAT DES EMPLOYÉS DE LA FONCTION PUBLIQUE DE L'ONTARIO



PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND UNION OF PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES



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