



Submission to the Consultation on Just Transition

September 2021

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.

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

We recognize and acknowledge the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done.

And, we dedicate ourselves, as a union, to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous Peoples in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

Introduction

Climate change is here. NUPGE's nearly 400,000 members, many of whom work in their provincial public sector, are on the front lines of the impacts of climate change, as they have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis.

NUPGE members include health care professionals caring for those affected by pollution and extreme weather. Our members are the social service workers providing care and support to the vulnerable populations affected disproportionately. They are the wildland firefighters facing longer and more severe seasons. Also, NUPGE members are the government workers responsible for implementing environmental protections, ensuring the public receive notice of evacuations, and carrying out various support programs for people.

In the last year, the overlapping crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change have reinforced the urgency of transforming our economy and society to be more sustainable, resilient, and just.

The crises have clearly demonstrated how the health of people, communities, and the environment are interconnected. They have also made clear that crises do not impact everybody equally, as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour), women, youth, people with disabilities, migrants, and people living in poverty or with low incomes disproportionately face negative impacts. The pandemic, along with the heat waves, fires, and floods of the last year, has also brought renewed attention to the front-line workers who provide critical services throughout it all.

The pandemic has underscored our collective responsibility to ensure that nobody is left behind. It has also shown that, when faced with a crisis, it is indeed possible to mobilize the necessary resources to address a problem and ensure people are supported. These are important lessons for tackling the climate crisis, especially when it comes to mitigating the impacts on workers and marginalized communities.

A comprehensive Just Transition strategy in Canada is overdue. We are glad to see the Canadian government acknowledging the realities of this crisis, and we appreciate the opportunity to provide input. Governments have a responsibility to proactively plan for the transition to a green economy. What's more, this is an opportunity to transition to a more sustainable, equitable, and just economy.

Worker-led and community-led solutions

First and foremost, workers, communities, and their representatives must be involved in developing Just Transition strategies and initiatives. This requires not a one-time consultation, but an ongoing, participatory, and collaborative process.

This is something that NUPGE and other unions have long been calling for. It 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.¹

Governments have the responsibility to bring together workers, their unions, employers, and community leaders to develop plans according to unique local circumstances. Different transition programs will be required for different industries and communities. The transition must be led by workers and their communities, as they are the most affected, but also because they understand the local context. Their knowledge and expertise make them the best positioned to define problems and find solutions.

Another of the task force's Just Transition principles was actions that are nationally coherent, regionally driven, and locally delivered. We urge the Canadian government to build on the work of the task force.

Supporting those on the front lines

As mentioned above, NUPGE members know first-hand the effects of climate change. We want to see governments take action to mitigate the damage and support workers and communities in the process.

We are also in solidarity with other workers affected by climate change, including those in the resource sectors. It is these workers that will be on the front line of the transition away from a carbon-based economy to a green one, and thus will be greatly impacted by *climate change mitigation* efforts.

We support an approach to decarbonization that does not cast aside the workers in affected industries, but instead involves them and their labour representatives in decision-making and policy-making processes to ensure the transition is fair and equitable for workers and their communities. To manage a Just Transition, the Canadian government will need to invest resources in training, social security and income supports, workforce development, and community supports.

Elements of a Just Transition strategy should include

- an industrial strategy that creates green jobs and sustainable communities,
- income maintenance when moving from a higher-paying position in a closing worksite or industry,
- creation of sustainable/green jobs,
- income support while new green jobs are being created or retraining is occurring,
- training programs to suit workers to new jobs,
- career-planning advice,
- maintenance of benefits and pensions, and

- financial bridging for older workers who choose to retire so that they receive full pension credits.

This type of suite of policies and programs is not unachievable. A recent report by economist Jim Stanford found that a managed transition away from fossil fuels, if done through long-term planning, can happen without sacrificing secure livelihoods for workers or strong job markets.² Looking at the Canadian labour market and energy transitions in other jurisdictions, the report finds that

when transitions are announced and planned in advance, when workers are supported with generous income supports and adjustment assistance (including retirement incentives), and when strong commitments are made to alternative employment creation (including but not limited to jobs in renewable energy projects), these transitions can occur without involuntary layoffs or severe disruption to communities.

In his report, Stanford identifies 10 principles, and corresponding policies, to guide effective transitions for workers and communities.³

We also point to research completed by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) that outlines what a Just Transition Act could look like. NUPGE supports the development of such legislation. Drawing from international best practices, the CCPA report proposes a framework for a Just Transition Act that would

- enshrine fundamental Just Transition principles, rights, and definitions;
- establish a Just Transition Commission to oversee and guide the government's transition agenda;
- establish a Just Transition Benefit to support workers in affected communities;
- establish an Economic Diversification Crown Corporation to invest in job-creating projects in affected communities;
- establish a Just Transition Training Fund that ensures access for historically marginalized groups to employment in the lower-carbon economy;
- establish a new federal-provincial/territorial Just Transition Transfer to deliver funding for these new social programs.⁴

The transition to a fairer, more sustainable economy will require robust and well-funded public services. The pandemic has underscored the immense value of public services and the social safety net, as well as the workers responsible for these programs and services. These workers—among them NUPGE members—are on the front lines of climate change, albeit in a different way than workers in the energy sectors. As outlined above, our members are on the front lines of dealing with the impacts of climate change, providing care, support, and services to the public, including our most vulnerable.

In this way, these sectors will be key to *climate change adaptation*. Investing in public services will be important for responding to, and adapting to, the effects of climate change that are already here and are expected to intensify.

The workers who were recognized as essential during the crisis must be seen as essential going forward, especially as the effects of climate change worsen. These workers must be supported and compensated accordingly. This includes fair wages and benefits, the appropriate resources and equipment to do their jobs, and the protection of their rights at work. Strong public and social services can also provide good, green jobs for the future, and are thus an important part of the transition.

Relatedly, *workers' environmental rights* can be part of a Just Transition. In collaboration with the Canadian Environmental Law Association, NUPGE has conducted research on what tools exist, or could exist, for workers to protect themselves from environmental hazards at work, as well as to better understand, mitigate, and/or prevent potential negative impacts of their work on the environment. We have developed a framework for workers' environmental rights, which can contribute to action on climate change and a just transition to a more sustainable economy.⁵

A more equitable future

A Just Transition strategy must work to address existing inequities to avoid repeating or further entrenching them. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation are uneven, with the brunt borne by Indigenous and racialized communities, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, migrants, women, and youth.

Climate action, including Just Transition law and policies, must explicitly and proactively incorporate equity. Otherwise, they run the risk of reproducing existing inequities or contributing to further marginalization. In 2019, research from the CCPA that looked at existing and future Canadian Just Transition policies found that

in the absence of proactive social policies to promote greater workforce diversification and inclusion, the decline of fossil fuels and the growth of alternative green industries will once again primarily benefit Canadian-born white men to the exclusion of marginalized people. Far more jobs will be created in green industries in the long term than are lost in fossil fuel industries, so ensuring those green jobs are accessible to more people is essential both for redressing historical inequities and meeting the labour needs of a decarbonizing economy.⁶

According to the Green Economy Network,

The struggle against climate change is now inextricably linked to the struggle against a failing economic system characterized by rising inequality. Faced with the Triple-E crisis of environment, economy, and equity, we must embrace bold progressive solutions that tackle these issues holistically. The trilogy of public investments, new job creation and GHG emission reductions sets a clear path ahead.

A new economic model for Canada—one which is clean and sustainable, just and participatory—is necessary if we are to build a better world in the 21st century and ensure a habitable planet for future generations.⁷

Conclusion

Governments must take an active role in strengthening Canada’s ability to move swiftly to a green economy. Governments have the ability—and a responsibility—to implement an industrial strategy and labour market programs to protect communities and ease the burden on workers and their families.

It is crucial to recognize and guard against the potential negative outcomes of this transition process, but it is also true that a Just Transition will provide new good jobs and an opportunity to address existing inequities to build a more equal and just society.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/climate-change/task-force-just-transition/final-report.html>.

² <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Employment-Transitions-Report-Final.pdf>.

³ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴ <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2021/04/Roadmap%20to%20a%20Canadian%20just%20transition%20act.pdf>.

⁵ <https://nupge.ca/content/workers-environmental-rights-report>.

⁶ https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/08/Who%20is%20included%20in%20a%20just%20transition_final.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. General 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.

■ 15 AURIGA DRIVE
NEPEAN, ONTARIO
CANADA / K2E 1B7

■ [613] 228-9800
FAX [613] 228-9801

■ www.nupge.ca

■ national@nupge.ca

