



COP Climate Summit and Why It Matters for Workers

Backgrounder

November 2024





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.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



Introduction

The global climate summit known as *COP* (Conference of the Parties) is a core part of international climate diplomacy. It brings countries together to determine how to collectively tackle the climate crisis. Non-governmental groups like labour and environmental organizations participate as observers. NUPGE has attended the last 3 COPs. This backgrounder outlines what COP is, why it's important, and why we engage in it.

What is COP?

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) [Conference of the Parties \(COP\)](#) is the main global summit for climate negotiations. COP is the decision-making body of the [UNFCCC](#), an international climate treaty on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to prevent human interference in the climate system. Countries that have ratified the Convention are *Parties* to it.

At COP, parties (countries) come together to review the implementation of the UNFCCC and other legal instruments related to it, like the Paris Agreement, which was reached at COP25 in Paris. COP is also a time where countries renew their commitments, set targets, and develop plans to move forward.

The first COP was in 1995, and the summit has taken place annually, with some exceptions. Most recently, COP28 was held in Dubai in late 2023. The upcoming COP29 will be in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November 2024. The country that hosts and leads the COP is referred to as the *Presidency*, with one individual representative who leads it.

How does it work?

Country representatives (ministers and negotiators) gather to negotiate on various topics. Topics include mitigating climate change (i.e., reducing emissions), adaptation (e.g., modifying our infrastructure, health care, or food systems for the new realities), and finance (e.g., how wealthy Global North countries will support climate action by Global South countries, who are most impacted by the climate crisis despite being less responsible for causing it). The *negotiations* often result in agreements or decisions that outline the collective next steps or commitments the countries have made.

COP is the supreme governing body of the UNFCCC, but the work is ongoing. There are sub-groups, known as *subsidiary bodies*, that meet annually in June.

In addition to country representatives, there are two other categories of participants: representatives of observer organizations and members of the media. Trade unions fall under the category of *observers*, along with environmental organizations, other civil society groups, and industry. Observers follow the negotiations and, collectively, have an opportunity to intervene through international groupings that are known as *constituencies* in the UNFCCC. For example, trade unions are organized into what is known, in UNFCCC lingo, as TUNGO (trade union NGOs). In each negotiation, there is a seat at the table for a TUNGO representative. Other examples of constituency groups are Indigenous peoples'

organizations (IPO), environmental NGOs (ENGO), the women and gender constituency (WGC), children and youth NGOs (YOUNGO), and business and industry NGOs (BINGO).

Within these groups there are representatives of individual unions or organizations, who can follow most of the talks. At times, the negotiations are closed to only parties and recognized observer organizations. In addition to the formal negotiations, there are also numerous *side events* happening throughout the summit, like panel discussions and presentations on various issues. There are also meetings where participants come together to exchange information, coordinate, and strategize.

There are many *actions* that happen throughout the COP. This may take the form of a demonstration, a march, a performance or art display, or various other creative actions to raise awareness of an issue or create pressure on the parties.

Why does COP matter to workers?

International climate negotiations are relevant to workers because climate action matters to workers. The impacts of climate change are affecting us in our communities and in our jobs. The actions that governments take to respond to the climate crisis have implications for us too. Workers must be at the table to help shape the way forward—not only because we will be impacted, but also because we have valuable expertise to contribute.

It is important that the labour movement participate in COP to ensure that the rights and needs of workers are considered at COP and recognized in the final agreements, commitments, and plans that come out of the summit. Trade unions are a small but mighty presence at these COPs. At COP28, for example, there were nearly 100,000 registered delegates, with less than 200 of them representing labour organizations. And yet, when we work together and with our allies in other movements, unions have been able to get workers' rights and issues on the table and into the final agreements.

A particular focus for unions at recent COPs has been *Just Transition*, a term that refers to ensuring that the shift to a low-carbon, greener economy minimizes the negative impacts on workers and communities and maximizes the benefits associated with the move to a more sustainable economy. To do so, it is integral that workers are at the decision-making table where plans are being developed. In UN parlance, this is referred to as [social dialogue](#).

Unions have been advocating for countries to commit to a Just Transition as part of climate action. This was successful in getting Just Transition into the landmark Paris Agreement in 2015. And, at COP27 in 2022, unions fought for a commitment to a work program on Just Transition, where countries would discuss and assess ways to achieve a Just Transition. At COP28, parties negotiated the details of the work program. Thanks to the efforts of unions, and working together with allies, key concepts like labour rights, social dialogue, and decent work were included in the decision text. This will help shape the focus and outcomes of future climate talks and the commitments countries are accountable to.

Why does NUPGE participate?

NUPGE engages in COP because climate action is important to our members and to all workers and our communities. At COP, we can represent our members' perspectives and ensure that the worker voice is at the table in international climate talks.

COP is also an important opportunity to work together and build solidarity with our allies in the labour movement and broader climate movement, both in Canada and internationally. We work with labour allies through the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Canadian civil society through Climate Action Network Canada (CAN-Rac). Together, our movements work to impact the outcomes of COP, whether it is pressuring our governments to raise their level of ambition in the talks or reach commitments on a particular issue of importance. This also strengthens our movements.

We also have an opportunity to engage in political action and build relationships with government representatives.

NUPGE brings a unique perspective as a union representing workers who deliver public services. Public services are already being impacted by climate change, whether it is worsening wildfire seasons, the strain on health care due to extreme heat or air pollution, damage to roads and other infrastructure, or the need for coordinating disaster response.

And so, robust public services will be an essential part of adapting to the changing climate and ensuring that our communities and services are resilient. In this, the needs of public sector workers must not be overlooked. Furthermore, they have critical knowledge and perspectives that can contribute to finding solutions to the climate crisis. Public services have not always been a main focus in the COP, and so NUPGE has worked to bring greater attention and connect with others working on public services.

After COP concludes, the labour and climate movements continue the work back home. We have an important role to play in holding our governments accountable to the commitments they make at COP and ensuring they deliver on them here at home.

COP is not without its limitations and imperfections. For example, there was significant controversy and questioning around COP28 because it was hosted in a major oil-producing country. The COP Presidency was led by the CEO of the national energy company, which despite its renewable energy has also committed to expanding oil and gas production. There was also a record number of lobbyists from the fossil fuel industry in attendance at this COP. This context had many people questioning: is it worth it to participate?

Caroline Brouillette, Executive Director of CAN-Rac, of which NUPGE is a member, eloquently addressed this question head-on during COP28. In an op-ed in the [National Observer](#), she stressed that an important question to ask is “who would benefit from civil society not showing up?”

People's participation is key to demonstrating our collective power and to countering the pressure from corporate interests. By engaging, we help ensure that our communities' and our members' concerns are on the table, and we continue to pressure our governments to deliver on a more sustainable, more just, and more equitable future.

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COMPONENTS



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



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NOVA SCOTIA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES UNION



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