

Labor conference on global warming fails to address energy

Wednesday 26 September 2007, by [SILBERMAN Jerry](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2007).

A North American Labor Assembly on the Climate Crisis was held May 7 and 8 in New York City [1]. Put on by the Cornell Global Labor Institute, the event was sub-titled “Building a Global Movement for Clean Energy”. A report by labor organizer and peak oil activist Jerry Silberman.

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Meeting in the expansive and technically sophisticated headquarters building of the United Federation of Teachers in the heart of New York’s financial district, it’s easy to forget that the labor movement in the US is on the verge of extinction as a meaningful political force outside a few select geographical regions.

Representation from the US labor movement was sparse, with the USW [United Steel Workers] and a few local New York unions contributing the bulk of the participation. As is frequently the case at such events, the participants were overwhelmingly white and middle-aged. Official support from the AFL-CIO was missing. An impressive contingent of international guests, largely from Canadian and European trade unions, and from the UN made up the balance of the attendees.

One could take two impressions away from the room. (Here I focus on US/Canadian participants. I will return to the question of those from other continents later.)

First, that of labor leaders who truly understand the threat posed by climate change, who are struggling to understand its implications for their members, and who are being pushed to take a broader world view than their membership by the nature of the problem.

Second, that of labor and NGO leaders whose view is essentially entrepreneurial, seeing the response to climate change as an opportunity to re-establish their political and economic voice by getting out in front of the redevelopment process.

Underlying premises about what to do

The balance between the two sets of leaders has to do with three premises that were not explicitly discussed at the conference, but which were implicit, if not uniform, among the attendees. (Caveat: I reject all of these premises categorically.)

1) Technological faith

Global warming poses a real threat to our survival, but we will inevitably master it through ingenuity and technological advance, through the business-as-usual approach of throwing money at the problem. The real questions are: Will we assure prosperity for all or increase social inequality? Implicit in this faith, as in the other premises, is that we do not question the model of “prosperity” which we have been promoting for the last three generations.

2) Growth is inevitable and good

We do not entertain the possibility of the shrinkage of the economy. Instead we will improve material conditions of life in the US through clean energy. We must take leadership in the world to avoid compromising our competitive position or economic strength. We must commit to growing the economy of the global South to eliminate poverty.

3) We do not face a lack of resources

There is no shortage of oil, coal, or natural gas to fuel our society. The partial transition away from them is driven only by the need to reduce Greenhouse Gases (GHG), and to assure “energy independence”. As in premise one, technology will provide the necessary energy.

The role of the USW in the event deserves attention. As the largest union representing workers in traditional manufacturing and resource extraction industries, its voice on these issues carries special weight. The United Steelworkers has absorbed in the past decade the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, the Paperworkers, the Rubber Workers, and includes through its history most organized mineworkers outside of the coal mining industry.

The development of the USW’s understanding of and commitment to environmental issues evolved directly from their concern with health and safety conditions in the workplace, and their view that management efforts to divide and conquer based on “good jobs vs. clean environment” should be given no more credibility than other management argument such as “pensions vs. wages” or “a safe work place vs. jobs.” USW has developed a close working relationship with the Sierra Club in their version of the “Blue Green Alliance.”

Wedges, but no peak oil

The conference began with an address by Robert Socolow, of the Carbon Mitigation Initiative of Princeton University. Socolow argued that we (USA) need to hold our GHG emissions steady for the next 50 years, and thereafter reduce them significantly to avoid catastrophic global warming. He recognized this as a very difficult goal, given the current steady increase in emissions, at the same time acknowledging that it falls far short of the recommendations of the International Panel on Climate Change.

Dr. Socolow is best known for proposing the “wedges” theory of strategies which could each replace 1 billion tons of carbon annually. Even though conservation was identified as the easiest wedge, the

notion that growth could or should stop was not part of his vision. His view is that the gross inefficiencies in energy generation and use, especially in buildings and electric generation, along with automotive technology improvements, provide us with the greatest opportunity for change with no pain. He is also a fervent believer in carbon sequestration so that we will have “clean coal.”

When questioned about return on energy investment, he was evasive, acknowledging that we would have to dig more coal to offset the energy needed for sequestration. The suggestion that fossil fuels were at or close to peak was rejected with the standard economic argument that they will become more expensive, which will spur investment in alternatives. How this squares with the clean coal argument is not clear.

Dr. Socolow also noted that very little carbon would be generated by upgrading the poorest 2 billion of the world’s population to modern technology, and that it might even be neutralized by ending low tech practices which contribute to global warming such as deforestation for fuel wood.

In concluding his address, he noted that “Workers, farmers, and entrepreneurs have almost solved the science; what is missing is political will.”

Sierra Club: a new day in America

The second speaker was Cathy Duvall of the Sierra Club, the featured environmental organization in this event. Duvall talked about the change in public awareness of global warming, citing numerous polls with strong numbers on recognition of the problem and the need to take action now. She rhetorically asked if the public cares enough to demand action. She then suggested this is basically a question of organizing, since there is no will at the federal level to deal with the issue, although states and cities are increasingly responding.

The gaps in her argument are serious but not cynical. The public’s desire for something to be done about global warming is, as we say in the union movement, a third party perception – someone else, government or corporations or whoever, should do something to solve the problem, without inconveniencing the public.

The public concern that something be done does not yet reflect a willingness to do something on a personal level, whether it be deciding to drive less, or to attend a Step it Up rally. She did not tie federal inaction to corporate ownership of Congress, but Carl Pope, speaking later, did make the connection. She did say that the carbon lobby was adjusting its tactics to remain in control. She argued for carbon pricing, advising a cui bono analysis of carbon control measures. Interestingly, she borrowed, and repeated, Reagan’s phrase “a new day in America” but it was not clear whether she was ironic in the usage.

Kicking and screaming

I attended two workshops, the first one being “No More Kicking and Screaming: Can Labor in North America. Take the Lead on Climate Crisis?”

This panel starkly displayed the weaknesses of the labor movement. Each labor speaker addressed the particular issues of his own union, relating them in an opportunist way to the issue of climate change. Despite the title, there was whining about corporate trade policies which have dissolved North American jobs in favor of China.

British Columbia lumber workers portrayed historic Canadian forest management policy as sound, but maintained that China was undercutting the domestic market by cheaply processing illegally harvested lumber into paper. They decried a new tariff scheme which favored the export of whole logs at the expense of finished forest products. The ravages of the pine beetle whose range and destructive potential are being augmented by global warming was the link to the issue at hand.

UNITE HERE [2] was frank. They said: if we can use this issue to organize and build the union, fine. If not, it's a luxury we can't afford. This attitude was perhaps the most openly opportunistic one in the discussion, showing a complete misunderstanding of the efforts of the USW to bind the issues. It was criticized by some in the room who argued that the labor movement is dying precisely because of its narrow perspective. I suggested that the debt situation of most workers living beyond their means offered us an opportunity to challenge consumerism in the interest of a better model of community and culture which is easier on the planet, an idea which was quickly shunted aside by the facilitator.

Historian Jeremy Brecher was most concise about the history of Gomerism and its legacy on this issue. [Gomerism = bread and butter unionism, with an almost exclusive focus on the workplace rather than broader issues] Only the Canadian Auto Workers rep was willing to talk about the need for fundamental change in the structure of the economy, including localization.

At the next plenary Carl Pope (head of Sierra Club) announced that the new energy economy is coming and the issue is whether labor will be at the table. This was useful in that he counterposed the control of renewables on behalf of the corporate elite with a more democratized culture. However he offered no value change that could create a genuine cultural alternative. It was the standard liberal plaint (cast in green) about the unfairness of the elite, without any willingness to examine the shared values of those in control and those claiming to be on the outside. Those shared values include growth, technology, centralization, consumerism, and capitalism, despite the fact that Pope and others asserted that the market alone could not turn the tide on global warming.

North, South split on biofuels

The second panel, on "Biofuels and Agriculture" sharply demonstrated the difference between those from the global North (specifically the U.S.), and those from the South. The consensus on biofuels in the room was that they are neutral as compared to fossil fuels in their effect on global warming, and that they are of generally very low energy efficiency compared to fossil fuels. They are important only as a substitute motor fuel in the North. The initiative for biofuels in the North, as led by George Bush, is for the purpose of "energy independence", i.e., not depending on oil imports from potentially unfriendly nations.

Nevertheless, almost all of the Northerners, including a Danish union rep, a Spanish delegate, and the AFL-CIO saw biofuels as helpful, useful and inevitable.

Those from the South, including the African and Mexican representatives, saw biofuels as effectively genocidal, taking food from poor people to feed cars, a continuation of the economic strategies which have already forced billions of peasants off their land and others into starvation as they grow cash crops for export (e.g., coffee, tea) instead of food for themselves.

When pressed, the Northerners responded that fuel from edibles was only an interim step, as technology for "cellulosic ethanol" came on line. The denial was palpable. Cellulosic ethanol promises no greater net efficiency than the conversion of oilseeds; in addition it will be exploited to despoil and mine a renewable resource which is rapidly disappearing - fertile soil. This is a part of

the equation that urbanites just don't get. While the AFL-CIO representative noted that it is important that the biofuel "industry" be democratic, and that it be prevented from falling into the hands of exploitive monopolies (although the horse may be out of the barn on this one already), and that workers in the industry in Brazil and elsewhere be treated fairly, his remarks struck me as hopelessly misdirected. The model of liberal trade unionism simply cannot grasp the limits of growth or resources.

This was apparent in the comments of several speakers who said that the industrial union model does not fit with sustainable or traditional agriculture, both of which function best when decentralized. The understanding that 1 calorie of food produced by modern, Northern industrial agriculture requires an input of 10 calories of fossil fuel, well documented in the sustainable ag and peak oil communities, came as news to most in the room.

I left the room both energized by the discussion, and gasping at the gap between the hemispheres.

Promoting the national interest by responding to climate change

The final plenary session was addressed by Jerome Ringgo, a former Louisiana chemical worker, and an energetic speaker. Ringgo is President of the Apollo Alliance and former chair of the National Wildlife Fund, and a self-identified token, noting how he brought diversity to the organization. (The only other African American to address the event was Roger Toussaint, president of TWU Local 100.) He began by talking about the need to reduce dependence on foreign oil, and cutting the purse strings to Venezuela and the Middle East. He pictured America as "brought to its knees" by foreign countries with control over vital resources.

He spoke for the most opportunist wing of the Apollo Alliance perspective, one in which responding to the climate crisis is a thin veneer for promoting the US national interest. In twice repeating the obvious fact that an unemployed worker who sees "Inconvenient Truth" is still unemployed when he walks out of the theatre, he focused the audience on the plight of the American worker, completely disregarding the global context or the polarization of wealth between countries, where even a very poor American worker is inconceivably well off materially compared to a slum dweller in Manila or Nairobi.

He staked out a position on the jobs vs. environment question which directly opposed the view put forward by the Steelworkers. He fervently plugged agrifuels, noting that we cannot have fuel restrictions that eliminate automobile manufacturing jobs.

He received a standing ovation, one of the most enthusiastic of the event. I can only imagine what was going through the heads of the Europeans, who from the podium uniformly challenged America's bloated consumption and refusal to pick up its share of the responsibility for the problem, let alone the view of the few people in the room from the global South.

Because I had to leave before the remaining speakers of the final plenary, and the sole plenary 'open mike' at the end of the day, I don't know what kind of response he received. It's possible that he was directly challenged.

In summary, I found the event valuable in showing the level of awareness of the problems of global warming and peak fossil fuels within the labor movement. There were many there, in the audience, far fewer at the podium, who are wrestling hard with these issues. For us to meet, even in the interstices of the official event was helpful.

American awareness still primitive

The awareness of these issues on the part of American labor, particularly regarding fossil fuel depletion and energy efficiency is still very primitive. I'm not sure how it will play out because a genuine response to global warming and peak fuel requires a fundamental shift of social and political values, moving outside the mental universe the labor movement currently inhabits. Nevertheless, as the honest thinkers within the movement look closer at the issues, some of them will move past their denial and into a more radical critique of their values.

The conference also demonstrated the continued inability of the US labor movement to adopt a genuine program of international solidarity. There is still a view that there cannot be a legitimate global movement without the US playing a leading role.

Speaker after speaker addressed the need for the US to take the lead, for US labor to be in front, etc. This unconscious imperial attitude, the blindness to both the political and economic weakness of the US labor movement, and the unique nature of its self-perceived problems and role vis-à-vis the rest of the world mean that we can have no leading role in this movement, but must humbly listen and learn. Perhaps most effective would be to follow some of the true leadership which is coming from Europe and the global South.

P.S.

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<http://www.energybulletin.net/29718.html>

* Editorial Notes:

Contributor Jerry Silberman writes:

I've never seen a direct reference to the labor movement in the Energy Bulletin, although I think the Apollo Alliance may have gotten some play. These are still somewhat important players in shaping US public understanding of the issue.

Author Silberman is a full time union organizer in his day job. He has been involved in various projects including organizing a peak oil conference in the city, and a mayoral forum on energy and global warming in the just concluded primary campaign.

Footnotes

[1] Webpage: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globala...>

[2] Homepage: <http://www.unitehere.org/about/>