

Joining the Climate Justice Movement



by Andrea Harden-Donahue

Thousands of people took to the streets in Copenhagen in December sporting signs that captured the urgency of the climate crisis: “There is no planet B” and “Planet not Profit!” were some of the messages. Others demanded a new way forward: “Climate Justice Now!” and “System Change, not Climate Change.”

With the launch of our “Climate Justice: Take Action for People and the Planet” campaign, climate justice has become an important part of the Council of Canadians’ energy work. While this focus is relatively new, many of the principles that have long guided our organization, such as achieving greater equity for people, reclaiming “the commons” (what lies outside the market and the states, such as the air we all breathe) and resisting corporate control, are central to achieving climate justice.

We went to Copenhagen this past December during UN climate negotiations to join the growing climate justice movement. At the same time, we exposed our government’s shameful record on the environmentally and socially devastating tar sands, which are Canada’s largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

SO WHAT DOES CLIMATE JUSTICE MEAN?

CLIMATE JUSTICE MEANS CLIMATE DEBT REPARATIONS

Naomi Klein’s article “Climate Rage” quoted Lidy Nacpil, one of the coordinators of Jubilee South, as saying: “What we need is not something we should be begging for but something that is owed to us, because we are dealing with a crisis not of our making.” Jubilee South is an international organization that has staged demonstrations to promote climate reparations. Lidy Nacpil went on to say, “Climate debt is not a matter of charity.”

With less than one-fifth of the world’s population, the global North (composed of the world’s wealthy countries) is responsible for emitting more than two-thirds of historic greenhouse gas emissions into an atmosphere that all life shares. Leading climate scientists say

“For us, the most important thing here is that Copenhagen was a success. Not there in the Bella Centre, but outside. Because there has been a lot of awareness, a lot of conscience, and now we have to build a very big movement. Things are not going to change in the negotiations if we don’t have a strong civil society mobilizing in the street. If we are able to demonstrate ... that we can mobilize fifty, one hundred million people saying ‘this is the kind of agreement that we want’ then the situation can change... Sometimes you cannot win the first battle, but we are going to win this war, because it’s the only way we can save our own lives and our Mother Earth.”

— Pablo Solon, Bolivian ambassador to the UN addressing a large crowd outside the Bella Centre protesting the Copenhagen Accord

that the highest safe level of carbon dioxide is 350 ppm (parts per million). The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is now at 389 ppm and we are seeing serious warning signs of global warming, such as receding glaciers.

Meanwhile, those who have contributed the least to this situation, including small island communities in the Pacific and communities in the Arctic and in the global South, are being hit first and hardest by the ecological and social impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels and increased floods and droughts.

Climate debt places a moral imperative on global North countries to not only make deeper emission reductions than the global South, but to also help pay

the bill for climate mitigation (actions that reduce emissions) and adaptation measures (actions that help people adapt to current and unavoidable impacts of climate change) in the global South. Estimates for long-term climate mitigation and adaptation in the global South range from \$195 billion up to \$400 billion needed yearly. Canada’s share has been projected at three to four per cent of the global total.

CLIMATE JUSTICE MEANS SYSTEM CHANGE, NOT CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate justice calls for re-visioning economies and societies to make them more ecologically sustainable and equitable. In June 2002 at the Earth Summit in Bali, representatives of people’s movements, together with activist organizations working for social and environmental justice, produced what is now referred to as “the Bali principles

of climate justice,” which have been used to guide the building of a climate justice movement. In addition to affirming such priorities as seeking the repayment of ecological debt and the rights of Indigenous peoples and affected communities to represent and speak for themselves, these principles helped provide a framework for delving into root causes of the climate crisis.

There is no doubt about the links between our current fossil-fuel, export-oriented global economy and the climate

crisis. It is no coincidence that the recent downturn of the export-dependent global economy was accompanied by a drop in greenhouse gas emissions. The economy is based on over-production, consumption, for-profit and corporate interests, while natural resources, including the air we breathe and water we need to live, are taken for granted.

Market-based mechanisms such as carbon offsets and carbon trading are rightly criticized as false solutions to the climate crisis which, at best, distract from the more systematic changes needed and, at worst, do little to reduce emissions and contribute to greater equity. There is good reason to be skeptical of the market’s ability to produce real emission reductions.

WHAT HAPPENED IN COPENHAGEN?

Representatives from countries around the world met in Copenhagen last December for a session of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This meeting was significant because it was the end of a two-year negotiation process intended to produce agreement in areas that include targets for emission reduction, plans and financing for reducing deforestation, adaptation to climate impacts, and clean technology co-operation between the global North and South.

The Council of Canadians went to Copenhagen demanding a strong international climate agreement, with deep emission cuts that would advance climate justice. This would require calling on global North countries, such as Canada, to commit to emission cuts of at least 40 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020. We called for significant contributions to climate financing for the global South to be managed according to democratic and equitable principles, and a rejection of new and expanded offsetting schemes.

CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS: COPENHAGEN ACCORD IS A BUST

Despite the best efforts of many participants lobbying for an effective agreement (many NGOs had their accreditation pulled for the final days of negotiations so their voices were unfairly silenced), a strong and effective deal was never reached. The Copenhagen Accord, a two-and-a-half-page document, emerged in the wee hours of the final day of negotiations. It does not include legally mandated emission reduction targets. Instead, countries are allowed to set their own targets. Based on current pledges, temperatures will continue to rise well above scientifically projected limits and the climate crisis will significantly worsen.

While the Accord does include pledges for financing climate debt, the long-term target of \$100 billion annually by 2020 is half of what many observers say is necessary and there are legitimate questions about whether it will be additional to existing pledges or left to the whims of the market. Further, the Accord itself is the production of back-room negotiations among a handful of countries



Anil Naidoo, Maude Barlow and Brent Patterson hold a banner that reads “Climate justice is water justice!” message during a rally and march in Copenhagen for UN climate change negotiations. The banner was signed by people who came to The Blue Summit organized by the Council of Canadians and CUPE in November.

— led by the U.S. and facilitated by Denmark — that threaten to undermine the existing, more democratic UNFCCC negotiating process.

RECLAIMING THE POWER

What did emerge from Copenhagen was a strengthened and growing movement for climate justice. The march on December 12 that drew 100,000 people is testament to this. The march prominently featured the demand for climate justice and was led by Indigenous Peoples delegations.

The “Reclaim the Power” demonstration on December 16 saw hundreds of delegates, fronted by members of the Bolivian delegation and the Indigenous Peoples’ Caucus, walk out of the Bella Centre where negotiations were taking place to join thousands of people literally and physically pushing for climate justice. People wanted to have a say in the Bella Centre negotiations and they were ready to use civil disobedience to claim this right. While the police responded by beating people with batons, protesters remained non-violent in their actions.

Despite the obstacles, a people’s assembly was held in the street outside the Bella Centre featuring diverse voices speaking to real and false solutions to the climate crisis. Real solutions include keeping fossil fuels in the ground (such

as a global moratorium on new coal development), innovative policies based on a “polluters pay” principle, respecting Indigenous land rights, and expanding public and community owned renewable energy.

NEXT STEPS: BUILDING THE MOVEMENT FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

While the criticisms of the Copenhagen Accord build daily, climate justice activists worldwide have returned home, bringing with them the message from the streets of Copenhagen, and mobilizing for real solutions to the climate crisis at a local level.

The Council of Canadians will join thousands of climate justice activists, government and labour representatives, and environmental organizations in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in April 2010 for the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. This will be a key opportunity to build the growing movement for climate justice and prepare an alternative platform with real solutions for the next major UN climate negotiations, which will take place in Mexico this November.

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