The Trailblazer

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CLIMATE CRISIS: Increasing Evidence of Global Warming

By David Kowalski

Excess greenhouse gas in the atmosphere caused by burning fossil fuels - coal, oil, or natural gas - is now resulting in dangerous global warming. Fifteen of the sixteen warmest years have occurred since the year 2000. 2014 set a new record and 2015 topped it. 2016 is on track for even more extreme warming, with January through May showing record-breaking global temperatures.

Burning fossil fuels emits carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that traps heat and is raising Earth’s temperature. Human-caused carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are now about 40% greater than the highest natural levels detected in the past 800,000 years. We are now in uncharted territory and this is certainly cause for alarm.

Human activity is defying Nature, and the climate is changing now. Nowhere is the fingerprint of climate change more evident than with extreme heat. This year, summer got its hottest start ever in three states: California, New Mexico and Arizona. Over 30 million people were under heat warnings or advisories. Record-shattering temperatures of 109° occurred in Los Angeles and 122° in Palm Springs. Tragically, on June 29th, six people died outdoors in 118° heat in Arizona.

Heat waves last for days and are deadly. Severe heat waves in Europe in 2003 and Russia in 2010 resulted in tens of thousands of deaths. A Chicago heat wave with temperatures up to 104° killed nearly 750 people in 1995. A California heat wave with temperatures as high as 119° caused up to 450 deaths in 2006.

A combination of heat and humidity (the heat index) that makes it feel like it’s 105° or hotter is termed a ‘danger day’. Warming temperatures are about to push U.S. cities into a new mode where...
In organizing our climate justice campaign, the Sierra Club Niagara Group has realized the wisdom in joining forces with the labor unions. This development may be surprising as unions are often viewed as protecting the jobs of their members in dirty industries like mining, petroleum refining, and coal and nuclear-powered plants, as well as the manufacturing of products that contribute to environmental pollution. There’s truth to that claim—the AFL-CIO, acting in the short-term interests of the United Mine Workers and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, for example, opposed the Kyoto Agreement. Still today, many of our union brothers and sisters remain skeptical of setting firm fossil fuel phase out benchmarks out of fear of massive job losses.

However, it’s also true that unions have been at the forefront of the environmental movement. Denis Hayes, the national coordinator of the first Earth Day held April 22, 1970, stated that “Without the United Auto Workers, the first Earth Day would likely have flopped.” The UAW was the biggest financial contributor to the event, printed and mailed out all the Earth Day materials at its own expense, turned out workers at every large city and endorsed the Clean Air Act that the big auto manufacturers were trying to kill or gut. Walter Reuther, the UAW president at the time, said, “The labor movement is about the problem we face tomorrow morning. But to make that the sole purpose of the labor movement is to miss the main target. I mean, what good is a dollar an hour more in wages if your neighborhood is burning down? What good is another week’s vacation if the lake you used to go to is polluted and you can’t swim in it and the and the kids can’t play in it? What good is another $100 pension if the world goes up in atomic smoke?”

Today, there’s a growing consensus among labor unions that we can and must replace a fossil-fuel-based economy with a renewable energy economy while creating millions of good “green” jobs. The Sierra Club and other environmental organizations have become increasingly aware of the economic devastation that can occur to workers and their families when fossil fuels are phased out and joined with organized labor in calling for “Just Transition” policies. These policies include government-supported safety nets and job retraining for displaced workers and economic assistance to affected communities.

In Western NY and across the state, many unions have joined the Climate Justice Campaign. Here are just a few examples:

- Health care unions such as the Communication Workers and NYS Nurses Association actively spoke out at rallies in support of banning fracking in NYS; NYSNA has also been outspoken at rallies in opposition to “Bomb Trains.”
- 1199SEIU (Service Employees International Union) passed a resolution in opposition to the proposed Seneca Lake gas storage facility. The 1199SEIU Vice-President engaged in civil disobedience at the site.
- Area unions including the 1199SEIU, BTF, CWA, and the Public Employees Federation helped fund Sierra Club buses traveling to Washington DC and to the People’s Climate March in NYC. CWA also provided funding for the “Rise Up for Climate Justice” campaign initiated by the Sierra Club Niagara Group.
- Sixteen labor unions and affiliated labor organizations signed the “Rise Up for Climate Justice Pledge” calling on the president to take the lead at the Paris climate talks; these organizations were represented at the September 24, 2015 rally in Niagara Square.
- The Sierra Club Niagara Group has met with unions directly involved in the construction of solar and wind facilities (Operating Engineers, Ironworkers and Electrical Workers) and agreed to promote projects such as Apex’s proposed wind farm in Niagara County.
- Twelve labor unions across NYS have joined the NY Renew campaign. These unions represent workers in health care, communications, transportation, auto manufacturing, electrical construction, and education. The 55 organizational member coalition which includes the Sierra Club, the Climate Justice Coalition of WNY and the Interfaith Climate Justice Coalition of WNY, is dedicated to passing the “Climate and Community Protection Act” to ensure the NYS has 50% renewable energy by 2030 and 100% by 2050.

The common interests of Labor Unions and our Climate Justice Campaign have successfully launched a new and mutually beneficial relationship amongst all parties involved. We look forward to continuing our work together to protect the environment, waterways, and mitigate the effects of climate change.