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# An Open Letter from 60+ Climate Justice Organizations to the AFL-CIO:

## Ours is a shared struggle for a just transition toward a new economy

September 8, 2013

### **Dear AFL-CIO President Trumka and Our Sisters & Brothers in the Labor Movement:**

There is a movement growing across the country and around the world—a movement to fight climate change and build a sustainable future for the planet and its people. This movement will define the 21st Century in the same way that seven great social movements defined the best of the 20th Century: labor, civil rights, environment, LGBTQ equality, women's, migrant rights, and peace & freedom.

But at the current time, Labor in the United States is not a central participant in the movement for climate justice. This is unfortunate because we believe that Labor must play a key role in this movement if it is to continue to represent the aspirations of working people, both on the job and beyond. At the same time, the environmental justice movement cannot halt climate change without organized labor. We need each other to win. Right now, none of us are winning.

**We write to you today, on the eve of the AFL-CIO 2013 Convention, to implore Labor to join us in the fight against climate change.** We represent grassroots social, economic and environmental justice organizations and networks based in and allied with Indigenous, African American, Latino, Asian Pacific Islander, and working class white communities, working for a just transition away from climate polluting industries, towards healthy, community-based economies that can weather the storm. We thank you for your tireless efforts in protecting our rights as working people. We understand that unions are under attack like never before, and we offer our solidarity. We also believe we presently face a historic opportunity to build a movement together – to protect the planet, and in the process, re-shape our economy to ensure it no longer benefits the few at the expense of the many.

**The crisis is real and now.** As President Trumka recently explained to the UN Investor Summit on Climate Risk, “Scientists tell us we are headed ever more swiftly toward irreversible climate change – with catastrophic consequences for human civilization.” And far from being a threat in a distant future, “Climate change is happening now.” As CO2 levels and temperatures rise, we are seeing unprecedented hurricanes, floods, heat waves, wildfires, droughts, crop failures, rising food prices, forced migration, cancer and asthma, and loss of biological and cultural diversity.

**Working people are hit first and worst.** As the crisis escalates, firefighters and other first responders are dying on the job fighting wildfires and other extreme weather events. We are seeing massive job loss in the wake of each storm. As working class communities inside and outside the labor movement, we are all on the frontlines of this crisis. We were the ones with no way out of the city when Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy hit. Our neighborhoods are where the power plants and refineries are sited, so it is our kids who get asthma and cancer. Our families eat pesticide-laced food because working at Walmart does not pay enough to buy organic produce.

Meanwhile, those who contribute the most to the ecological crisis, continue to profit from it and use it as a means by which to push takeaways – hotels that cut laundry workers after urging guests to “save water,” laying off jet fuelers when the airlines gets fuel efficient planes, downsizing cafeteria staff as schools move from “from-scratch” to “warming-only” kitchens. Transition is inevitable, but justice is not. The costs of reducing our consumption are real, but must be borne out of profit, not people. Who profits from and who pays for this crisis depends on the kind of movement we build. And, to build a united movement against climate change, we need to address its root causes. Those causes – corporate power, globalized markets, Wall Street – should serve to unite us, not keep us divided.

**Corporate control is the real job killer.** As the labor movement knows all too well, our current economy is structured to generate wealth for the few at the expense of the many. The 1% generates massive profits by getting out more value than it puts in. It does this by exploiting two things: human labor and the natural world, often in that order. Said another way, resource extraction – whether clear-cutting forests, drilling for oil, or abusing human labor – subjugates and subordinates our natural resources to the chains of the market to produce a profit. As these markets run into resource and cost constraints, be it the availability of sweet crude or the cost of coal, the 1% must turn to other available and exploitable resources to maintain their margins (e.g. natural gas, biomass, palm oil). Such market “alternatives” are proving to be deadly for the environment. But they are even more deadly for workers and communities, because in order to squeeze the same profit margins out of an economy that requires costly inputs, the 1% must make cuts somewhere. And those cuts come in the

form of massive layoffs and takeaways, assaults on public institutions like health care, education, pensions, welfare, etc.

**The solution is to reclaim and democratize our economy.** If the root cause of our economic and ecological crises is that labor and natural resources are exploited for profit by a greedy few, the solution is economic democratization. Our work no longer serves our interests, but serves a market that produces profits for others. The solution is to reclaim greater control of our work, and insist that our work benefit our communities, not line the pockets of the rich. As long as the corporations control our jobs, our jobs will control us and limit our ability to stop planet-destroying industries. Rather, we must build up community resiliency and our own ability to provide food, water, housing, health care and education for ourselves, through jobs that serve our communities long into the future.

**We must lead with a vision of a new economy.** We will lose on both climate stability and worker rights if we desperately hold onto the frayed edges of the current unraveling and exploitative economy. Instead of trying to salvage a broken system, we have to reach for what we need both to survive and have decent lives. We have to lead with a vision of a just transition to a new economy that is ecologically resilient, socially just, supports healthy communities, and expands worker and community control over our labor, livelihoods and earth's resources. Such a sustainable economy would create far more jobs. By bringing work back home and investing in labor-intensive alternatives to mechanized pollution, an ecologically sound economy would provide more work, not less. Such an economy would replace endless economic growth and the concentration of wealth with greater economic depth and a redistribution of wealth by sinking resources into the communities where we live, work, pray and play.

**Environmentalists must back worker justice and advocate for a just transition.** We call on our fellow environmental and climate organizations to show real solidarity to union and worker justice fights, as we have, and to forge meaningful relationships and strategic partnerships with labor at local, state, and national levels. And our entire movement must fight for a just transition for workers impacted by our campaigns against extreme energy [1], extraction and waste industries. In fact, we need to deal seriously with the transition needs of entire communities whose livelihoods currently rely on industry sectors, such as coal mining and thermal power plants.

**We must shift from Jobs vs. Environment, to Jobs for the Environment.** Collaboration won't be easy. Both labor and environmentalists have often bought into and been divided by the "jobs vs. environment" lies that distract us from the real, clear evidence of culpability – concentration of corporate power. Their networks of destructive, polluting and wasteful industries have eliminated and eroded long-term employment, while

polluting air, water and food for our communities. However, we know there are economic pathways we can build together – pathways in zero waste, clean energy, public transportation, community housing, food sovereignty and ecosystem restoration, where millions of new, community-supporting jobs can be created, while reducing pollution and poverty across the country.

We must work together on climate not just because it is the right thing to do, not just because it impacts working people first and worst, not just because the biggest climate polluters are our biggest foes, not just because there are more jobs in a low carbon economy, but because we will only win if we agree to take this issue head-on, together. Together, we can ensure that workers and communities can make a living on a living planet.

**Let's do this together.** We request a meeting with the AFL-CIO leadership to discuss the Federation's response to climate change and how to strengthen our collective struggles. We know that at the heart of the labor movement is grassroots activism, so if you're a union member, staff, or elected official, we'd love to hear your ideas and reactions [here](#).

For more information, contact Climate Justice Steering Committee member, Bill Gallegos at [bill@ourpowercampaign.org](mailto:bill@ourpowercampaign.org).

**In solidarity,**

[Athens County Fracking Action Network](#)

[Alaska Community Action on Toxics](#)

[Alliance for Appalachia](#)

[Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#)

[Black Mesa Water Coalition](#)

[Buckeye Forest Council](#)

[Castle Mountain Coalition](#)

[Catskill Mountainkeeper](#)

[Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy](#)

[Center for Story-Based Strategy](#)

[Citizens' Alliance for Responsible Energy](#)

[Climate Justice Alliance](#)

[Communities for a Better Environment](#)

Community Research

Community to Community Development

Concerned Citizens of Franklin County

Cornell Global Labor Institute

Dogwood Alliance

Don't Waste Arizona

East Michigan Environmental Action Council

Energy Justice Network

Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative

Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives

Global Justice Ecology Project

Grassroots Global Justice Alliance

Grassroots International

Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit

Green Delaware

Indigenous Environmental Network

Institute for Policy Studies – Climate Policy Program

Ironbound Community Corporation

Just Transition Alliance

Kentuckians For The Commonwealth

Labor Community Strategy Center

Labor Network for Sustainability

Little Village Environmental Justice Organization

Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment

Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project

Movement Strategy Center

NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program

Neighbors Against the Burner

New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

Nothing Left to Waste

Nuclear Information and Resource Service

POWER

People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights

Protect Arkansas Wildlife

Right to the City Alliance

Rising Tide North America

Ruckus Society

San Antonio Bay Waterkeeper

SouthWest Organizing Project

Southwest Workers Union

Texas Injured Workers

350.org

US Food Sovereignty Alliance

Union of Commercial Oystermen of Texas

UPROSE

Vermont Workers' Center

We the People Eugene

Work on Waste USA

World Temperate Rainforest Network

*Letter authored by members of the Climate Justice Alliance*