

TUC CLIMATE CHANGE BILL CONFERENCE, 4 JUNE 2007

Thank you Paul, thank you for work you do with TUSDAC, and thank you all for coming today.

I don't know about you, but it's a bit warm down here.

I blame the weather.

This is a timely and important conference, and I welcome the chance to put the TUC view on what is arguably the single greatest challenge facing humankind.

An issue that does not merely threaten environmental catastrophe – but everything that goes with it, from conflict to famine to mass migration on a scale unprecedented in history.

From the melting ice cap in the Arctic to the growth of deserts in sub-Saharan Africa, from rising sea levels to the decline of Alpine ski slopes, the evidence of climate change is now all around us.

Despite what the American oil industry may say, despite what Jeremy Clarkson may claim, despite what the rest of these latterday flat earthers purport to believe, the science of global warming is indisputable.

Not just an inconvenient truth – but a disturbing reality we simply cannot ignore.

And the challenge we surely face now is essentially political.

To make the case for urgent action both here in the UK and internationally.

For the TUC, climate change has become a key issue.

It's not just about the sustainability of our natural resources.

It's not just about quality of life for us and our children, and our children's children.

It's also about employment, jobs and opportunities for millions of workers.

And though it hardly needs repeating, those who are affected most by our overheating planet are ordinary working people and the poor in the developing world.

As the Stern Report made clear, it is “the most vulnerable – the poorest countries and populations – who will suffer earliest and most, even though they have contributed least to the causes of climate change”.

So first and foremost this is a debate about global justice.

And it’s clear our response must be collectivist, interventionist and internationalist.

Guided by the public interest, not afraid to regulate the market, or use corporate tax as well as trading schemes, enthusiastic about the possibilities of global cooperation.

All concepts inimical to our opponents on the right.

So the progressive left can and must take the lead.

And the trade union movement must be at the heart of the red-green coalition now emerging.

Or should I say the red-green-Brown coalition now emerging?

The TUC certainly welcomes the Climate Change Bill we are discussing today.

A landmark piece of legislation that has the potential to make this country a world leader in fighting global warming.

We support the headline target of reducing carbon emissions by 60 per cent by 2050.

We back the interim target of a 26 to 32 per cent reduction by 2020.

And we like the idea of rolling five-year carbon budgets.

But we believe we need to be bolder.

As the recent report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made clear, the scale of the challenge we face is even greater than previously assumed.

And while the TUC supports the idea of an independent Climate Change Committee, we

believe this needs to go far beyond a scientific, technical remit.

We want to see a multi-stakeholder body, because NGOs, business and unions need to contribute to what a new low-carbon economy must look like.

For all the Bill's merits, and there are many, it says relatively little about workplaces, employers and employees.

And that for us is a glaring omission.

Because with our workplaces belching out 60 million tonnes of carbon a year – around half our total emissions – it's clear we desperately need to change the way we work.

That, of course, is where we in the trade union movement can make a significant contribution.

We believe the workplace is a natural forum for bringing people together around a common purpose.

By working in partnership, trade unions, workers and employers can make significant inroads towards reducing our carbon footprint.

Improving energy efficiency, reducing waste and promoting greener working practices.

Involvement and engagement are absolutely key.

The Carbon Reduction Commitment in last week's Energy White Paper – which covers the 5,000 largest service sector organisations, both public and private – provides a perfect opportunity for trade unionists and employers to work together on this kind of agenda.

And we have a really solid platform to build on.

Our Green Workplaces project with the likes of Corus, Friends Provident, Scottish Power, the British Museum, DEFRA and here at the TUC itself.

And our Carbon Partnerships Project, covering all 61 unions affiliated to the TUC, which we are launching this year.

Building on our network of environmental reps and 1,000 Climate Change Champions.

Promoting environmental education for our members and activists.

And developing our ideas to make workplaces greener.

As the survey of 700 reps published today by LRD shows, there is a huge contribution we can make.

But our role does not stop at the office door or factory gate.

With 6.5 million members responsible for 25 million tonnes of carbon emissions a year, we believe we have an important awareness-raising role to play.

And that's vital: because as a MORI poll earlier this year suggested, one in three people still know little or nothing about climate change.

In short, we want our members to apply the same green principles at home as they do at work.

Saving themselves money at the same time as they save the planet.

And there's another area where trade unions can make a huge contribution.

That's flexible working.

Helping the UK move beyond the environmentally-damaging model of working time.

The misery of rush-hour commutes, traffic congestion, and creaking transport infrastructures.

The misery of long hours and unpaid overtime working late into the evening burning lights and energy.

And all of the greenhouse gas emissions that entails.

That's why we're arguing for the right to request flexible working to be extended to everyone.

And why we're making the case for flexitime, including nine-day fortnights.

All popular measures that would improve quality of life for vast numbers of workers.

New ways of working are just one way of easing the transition to a low-carbon economy.

And it's this I want to turn to now.

I believe the switch to clean, green production will be the defining economic challenge of our age.

It will entail the rise and fall of whole industries, and will be critical to the jobs and opportunities of millions of ordinary working people.

But if we get our approach right, if we develop a really imaginative policy agenda, I believe we can strike the right balance between economic dynamism and sustainability, moving beyond the false dichotomy of “jobs versus the environment”.

As a member of the Commission for Environmental Markets and Economic Performance along with Paul Noon, I’m convinced this is a circle that can be squared.

Provided, that is, we properly support the low-carbon industries of tomorrow, from green manufacturing to wave and wind power.

With an intelligent industrial strategy – like that in Germany – this country has the potential to lead the world in these new technologies.

Creating both new employment, and new commercial opportunities.

And nowhere is that more important than in clean coal.

While we welcome the government's commitment to a major carbon capture and storage project, the TUC is concerned that we are still failing to grasp the nettle on this critical issue.

Not just because clean coal has the potential to provide a long-term solution to our need for secure, sustainable energy.

Not just because 40 per cent of our power generation capacity needs refurbishing or replacing in the next decade.

Not just because some fear that UK coal is turning itself into a glorified estate agent.

But because we are overlooking the wider economic significance of clean coal.

If we have the courage to really invest in R&D, to put our money where our mouth is, we could reap the rewards of what could become a significant global market – not least in China, the coal-fired power capital of the world.

With a coal-fired power station opening in that country every week – yes, every week – the importance of this is surely self-evident.

But whether it's clean coal or wave power, we need to make sure we have the skills in place to facilitate our transition to a low-carbon economy.

The equation we face is quite simple.

New technology equals new skills.

And here, once again, there is a major role for trade unions.

It's clear we need much greater co-ordination between the different sector skills councils, not least those cover energy, mining and construction.

But as we focus on our skills needs for the future, as we prepare for the low-carbon economy, as we concentrate on making our existing workplaces cleaner and greener, none of us must lose sight of the wider challenge we face on global warming.

While we must do everything in our power to reduce the UK's carbon footprint, it is only through international action that we can make a difference where it really matters – at the global level.

The trade union movement has always been proudly internationalist, and those same values – that transcends language barriers and national borders, that belief in our common humanity – must now come to the fore in the battle against climate change.

Global collective action, based around shared vision of a common interest, is our only option.

That was the message the trade union delegation I was part of took to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel ahead of this month's G8 summit.

We argued this is an issue too important to be left to the whims of individual national governments or the invisible hand of the market.

We argued the G8 needs to develop a "Just Employment Transition Strategy" to help workers cope with the changes that lie ahead.

And we argued Europe must take the lead in showing the virtues of transnational collaboration.

Building on success stories like the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, inspiring others to follow suit.

Not lecturing the developing world about what it can and can't do, not lapsing into some crude "green imperialism", but underlining just what can be achieved through trade justice and collective action.

And this takes me back to what I was saying at the beginning.

About the fight against climate change being natural territory for all of us on the left and centre-left.

And we in the trade unions must not underestimate the importance of our role.

Because by mobilising workers, by holding employers to account, and by pressing governments for change, we can make a real difference.

Tackling global warming must become as much part of our core business as tackling global poverty and inequality. In fact, the two go together.

From the struggle against fascism to the campaign for equal rights, from the fight against apartheid to the drive for universal public services, our movement was at the forefront of the great progressive battles of the twentieth century.

And I've no doubt the fight against climate change will be one of the great causes of the twenty first century.

So we must be where we have always been.

Leading from the front.

Pressing for change.

**Showing that a better world can be within our
grasp.**

Thank you.