

For a Class Struggle Approach to Climate Change and Energy Transition

by Karl Cloete, National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)

The following paper was presented on October 10, 2012, at a conference at Cornell University. NUMSA is South Africa's second-largest union, with almost 290,000 members in the smelting, manufacturing, auto and electricity generation industries.

Our starting point as NUMSA is that to effect an energy transition, we as the global union movement do need a perspective to guide us as well as strategies to be utilized by the movement. While such a perspective and accompanying strategies will definitely not come fully formed and in one go, we have to keep working on them through discussions, through struggles, through experimentation and through learning from experiences of those in the forefront of energy struggles (within and outside of the labor movement).

Those who were at our February 2012 International Conference on Building a Socially Owned Renewable Energy Sector will know that in our head office in Johannesburg, we have a huge banner with the words: No Revolutionary Theory, No Revolutionary Movement! The slogan on the banner captures how much we, as a union attach to having a perspective that acts as a compass to our daily work. Our message to this roundtable is simple: Without a

...we are calling for nationalization and socialization of the coal industry as a stepping stone to a clean energy future.

solid perspective on how to effect an energy transition, there will be no transition.

Let me now share with you what our union's perspectives are:

First: we are of the view that the United Nations (UN) climate negotiations are unable to deliver a deal and outcome that will save our planet. It is a result of this failure that we are calling for a class struggle approach to climate change; an approach that emphasizes resistance both at national and global levels in a manner that influences and changes government positions on climate change.

Second: we think that there will be no managed energy transition if we do not take control of the hydrocarbon (coal, oil and gas) sector and put the sector under public ownership and democratic control. In our own country, we are calling for nationalization and socialization of the coal industry as a stepping stone to a clean energy future.

Third: we believe that to reduce global warming to acceptable levels requires fundamental restructuring of the capitalist system as we have come to know it. At the centre of such restructuring is the question of who owns the means of energy production, transmission, distribution and consumption. As a union, we are advancing a perspective of social ownership of energy systems.

1. When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are referring to the fact that ownership of energy resources must be taken out of private hands and be put in the hands of the public through a mix of different forms of collective ownership, such as energy parastatals [public utilities], cooperatives, municipal-owned entities and other forms of community energy enterprises where full rights for workers are respected and trade union presence is permitted. Energy entities that were privatized must be taken back and put under public ownership and control.
2. When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are referring to energy being a public or common good that is publicly financed and comprehensively planned. We want to roll back the anarchy of liberalized energy markets.
3. When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are expressing our determination to resist commodification of electrical power and our desire that energy systems should not be for profit but have as their mandate service provision and meeting of universal needs.
4. When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are speaking of a system where workers, communities and consumers have control and

Socially owned energy systems must prioritize renewable energy...

a real voice in how energy is produced and used. We are calling for constituency-based governing councils **in place** of boards of directors in all energy entities. Existing state or publicly owned energy entities that act as private companies and on the basis of a profit motive need to be "socialized."

5. When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are calling for the accrual of a large share of economic benefits of energy production

and consumption to producers and owners of the actual means through which energy is generated, transmitted and distributed.

6. When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are referring to energy systems that respect our environmental rights, our rights for survival and those of future generations. Socially owned energy systems must prioritize renewable energy as part of respecting our environmental rights.

As a way of concluding, let me raise a few points in relation to the framing document produced for this roundtable.

Technology transfers to developing countries must not be fettered by intellectual property rights.

The first thing we want to raise is around the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility.” It is common cause that the contribution of the developing world and Africa in particular to the climate catastrophe that faces us is very miniscule. The developing world therefore cannot be required to share equally the burden of mitigating and adapting to climate change. The global North and developed world must shoulder the bulk of the burden and pay for their climate debt. Technology transfers to developing countries must not be fettered by intellectual property rights. The trade unions in the North and in developed countries must appreciate and endorse the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility” if real unity is to be built. This is vital if one considers that one of the dreadful outcomes of Durban’s COP17 is—in the future—to do away with the distinction between the culprits and victims, between developed and developing countries.

The second issue that we want to pick up is related to the first one. How much scope do developing countries have in the available and remaining carbon space given the fact that developed countries have over the years and historically taken the large chunk of the space through their emissions? What leeway do developing countries—that anyway have the least resilience to adapt—have? We are raising this fully aware of how polluters and denialists in the global South hide behind the slogan of the “right for the developing world to industrialize.” But as the global labor movement we need to talk about the energy transition fully cognizant of the history of the problem and the power imbalances that exist between developed and developing countries. As NUMSA we are worried about what we are witnessing where workers in different countries are lining on different sides of the barricades, with national unions lining up with their governments and corporate entities. In this regard we want to make reference to decisions by the Unit-

ed Steelworkers Union joining dozens of US solar-panel installers in support of a trade complaint filed with World Trade Organization (WTO) by US solar-panel manufacturers against Chinese rivals.

The third issue that we feel that the framing document does not deal with adequately and which we also as union must answer is: What should be the attitude of global union movement to the UN climate change negotiations? It’s one thing to talk about the failure of the COPs [climate talks]. What should we do in relation to them? What alternatives are there?

The fourth point that we need to raise is the relationship of what we do around climate change and international trade. The dispute that Japan and the EU have filed with the WTO against the Ontario Green Energy Act raises fundamental questions about whether the goals of trade liberalization can be reconciled with ecological imperatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As NUMSA we feel that we have to fight for the energy transition in both tracks: the climate change track and the international trade one.

The fifth issue that we want to pick up is the relation of our work on climate change and an anti-war posture that the global trade union movement should adopt. The military is the largest institutional user of petroleum products and energy, with the Pentagon being the single-largest oil consumer in the world. Yet the Pentagon has a blanket exemption in all international climate agreements. NUMSA and COSATU’s view is that stopping wars—as they have such a high carbon footprint—is a necessary component of attempts to reduce global warming. We also call for the scrapping of the exemption afforded to the Pentagon and its bases from emission calculations.

The sixth and the last thing we want to raise is how do we implant a new discourse and perspective on the required energy transition among our members and communities. Here I would like to highlight a demand that NUMSA is making to employers and energy agencies for union and shop steward involvement in the development of workplace energy efficiency plans. At its recent

national congress, the Congress of South African Unions (COSATU) called for union involvement in the development of mitigation plans at company and sectoral levels; carbon budgets; jobs resilience plans in sectors; and lower-carbon development strategies. The federation also called for the formalization of the status the National Committee on Climate Change (NCCC), which has labor and community representatives and which advises the minister of environmental affairs on matters of climate change, into an advisory council with statutory powers and responsibilities. We are hoping that through these efforts we can make climate change and related energy questions a union and bargaining issue; with a large enough cadre layer championing the issues.

Karl Cloete addresses NUMSA’s February 2012 International Conference on Building a Socially Owned Renewable Energy Sector in Johannesburg.

...stopping wars is necessary to reduce global warming.
