

CUPE BC 2022 CONVENTION ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE REPORT

The Environment Committee is thankful to be able to meet and collaborate on the unceded lands of the Coast Salish peoples. May we all walk softly through this land upon which we are uninvited visitors, respect it, and care for it as the Indigenous Peoples have done for centuries before us.

The CUPE BC Environment Committee met in October & November 2021 and again in January 2022. The Committee discussed many environmental issues, including waste reduction, sustainable products being procured for the CUPE BC store and by locals, the use of noxious and harmful chemicals in our workplaces, the resistance by employers to transition fleets to carbon neutral technology, and many other issues. The unanimous conclusion of the Committee was that despite the broad range of issues that could be considered, the climate crisis was the priority. The global climate emergency has become a dire situation that requires bold action from our membership, government, and the public at large.

One Earth Statement

All Committee meetings start with the One Earth Statement and the Committee encourages locals and district councils to adopt this practice in respect of the work required by all of us to meet the environmental challenge ahead. The One Earth Statement reads:

CUPE members shall be mindful of their choices, and endeavour to make decisions that support the best practices to protect our environment. Please recycle all distributed documents, respecting the confidentiality of the material therein. Commit to walk, bike, carpool, or take Public Transportation when you can. Bring a reusable cup to your meetings. Our Union fosters awareness of reducing, reusing, and recycling. In this way, we respect our Environment, each other, and future generations.

CUPE National Environmental Policy

The Committee spent significant time considering how best to proceed with its work over the coming term and how to address unified issues that speak to the diversity of members, workplaces, and environmental issues. Members felt that a good place to start was a review of the National Union's latest policy on the environment. Recently updated, the policy provided a solid grounding for the Committee's work over the coming months and reaffirmed the climate

crisis as the single largest challenge facing humanity in terms of the environment. A representative quote from the policy on this matter is as follows: “All other environmental issues are affected by climate change, from stressing compromised freshwater reserves, to jeopardizing fragile ecosystems, such as forests and coral reefs. The climate must be stabilized by fully decarbonizing our way of working and living if there is to be any hope of solving our environmental problems.”

The Committee reviewed the major themes of the policy and allocated its coming meeting to explore those themes through focused discussions of how CUPE BC could be more active on the key topics outlined by the National Union.

The Climate Emergency: BC on the Frontline

The Committee feels a responsibility to share information about the severity of the climate emergency and how it impacts our members and communities. Below is an outline of some key conclusions from this past year’s events.

Extreme Heat and Wildfires

Our committee was formed in the aftermath of what is now being called a “one-in-a-thousand-year” heat dome over our province. Experts now directly attribute over 500 deaths to this event and are declaring it the deadliest weather event in Canadian history. During and following this deadly extreme heat event, our province endured its third worst wildfire season to-date, marked by 1,600 fires burning an area of nearly 870,000 hectares (over 2 million acres or 3 times the size of the Lower Mainland), thousands of people being displaced from their homes, wildfire smoke blanketing vast areas of the province for weeks at a time, and 90% of the Village of Lytton being burned to the ground. CBC Meteorologist Johanna Wagstaffe has advised that climate modeling indicates our experiences this year could turn into a “one in five-to-ten-year event by 2050” if the average global temperature rises to 2° Celsius.

Atmospheric Rivers, Flooding, and Landslides

Shortly after our Committee held its inaugural meeting at the One Big Committee Webinar, our province once again suffered a devastating event that can be linked to the climate crisis. In November of 2021, record rain fell across much of the Pacific Northwest, causing massive flooding and landslides. Highways and railways were rendered impassable, cutting off the lower mainland to the rest of the country by both land and road. Five people were killed and 10 more hospitalized; the death toll for livestock counted included 28,000 poultry, 12,000 hogs, and 420 cows. Infrastructure damage alone has been estimated to be \$7.5 billion. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that with each degree of warming above preindustrial averages, the atmosphere is capable of holding 7% more in the form of water vapor. We are

currently at 1.2° and warming. This trend will continue to exacerbate events such as the flooding we saw in BC in 2021.

Code Red for Humanity

The IPCC, the United Nations foremost global authority on climate change, released its sixth report at the end of the summer. It is titled “Code Red for Humanity” and includes eight more years of accumulated data than the previous edition. Climate scientists state that there is nothing surprising in the report, but suggest the new data adds clarity to the severity of the climate crisis. Of particular note, the report confirms with 100% certainty that events, such as the devastating heat dome experienced in BC, would not have happened without the impacts of climate change, that human activity is without a doubt driving climate change, and that existing levels of global warming have created changes to many of our planetary support systems that will be irreversible on timescales of centuries to millennia. While the report provided a stark warning about the direness of the climate crisis, it also shared hope that if humanity can cut its global greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2050, the climate’s rise in temperatures could be halted or reversed.

The Committee’s Response

Given the severe negative impacts of climate change for the world, British Columbians, and CUPE members, and the fact that these impacts are comparable or even outweigh all other environmental issues combined, the Committee discussed and requested that its name be changed to include “climate” in addition to “environment.” The purpose being to help sharpen the focus of the Committee in the years to come. The Committee also discussed a series of initiatives focused on climate awareness and recognition.

Climate Week

The Committee discussed whether or not climate change is given the attention that it deserves, noting that it does not get the same recognition as other important social causes, even though these same social causes are reliant on a sustainable climate.

In response, the Committee has recommended that Earth Week (the week in which Earth Day falls) be recognized by a pin and/or ribbon campaign, where a pin or ribbon is worn by members for the week, to recognize the dire situation of the climate crisis. The environmental impact of such a campaign was also discussed, but it was decided that the benefits of having greater swaths of society recognize the climate crisis outweighs the environmental impacts, which could be managed by encouraging the reuse of such ribbons and pins.

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Key Dates

The Committee discussed the many important environmental days recognized by the United Nations, and others, and hopes that more could be done to promote these days. Having Buy Nothing Day, World Oceans Day, and International Day for Biological Diversity be recognized by CUPE BC further encourages a culture of sustainability, and recognition of how human actions impact different elements of our environment.

Reusable Materials

The Committee discussed the effectiveness of zero waste lunch mandates and agreed that such practices should be put into CUPE BC workplaces where possible. The Committee also discussed the positive role that could be played by the CUPE BC store in promoting sustainably produced, reusable materials that discourage single-use items. Through research, the Committee learned that the options for finding union made environmentally friendly merchandise were limited, but conversations about the single-use culture of give-away items is ongoing with hopes of making positive contributions to a more reusable culture.

Orientation to the National Union Environmental Policy

As noted above, the Committee undertook a deep review of the CUPE Environmental Policy, recognizing that it clearly highlights the necessity that CUPE members weigh heavily on the climate and environmental impacts of all that we do. A presentation has been prepared to highlight the most important parts of this policy with the CUPE BC Executive, and the Committee has proposed that this presentation be offered at the 2022 Think Tank.

Resolutions

The Committee discussed several resolutions and decided the following were of the greatest importance. Though they are listed in order of priority, each has a high degree of merit, relating directly to the climate crisis and our members' relationship to this issue in terms of their work and lives. Each of these resolutions, if adopted, would be direct efforts by CUPE BC to engage in foundational work that addresses the climate emergency.

Right to Operate Clean Energy Vehicles and Equipment (RTOCEVE)

Our committee members prioritized this resolution, as it was deemed bold in its function, has the ability to be adopted by workers worldwide, and is a unique argument for clean energy vehicles that has not yet been made widely. The basic logic for this resolution is that while many workers are granted the right to a work environment free of secondhand smoke and vapour, others who work around fossil fuel powered vehicles and equipment have no choice

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but to accept the exposure to these emissions and fuels. This is despite medical research proving that these toxic substances are known to cause severe disease and even death in humans, and that viable clean energy solutions are now available. Two additional arguments for the RTOCEVE are that these clean energy solutions have the potential to lessen the impacts of the climate crisis for future generations (a worker should have the right to do no harm), and these solutions are often proving to be more cost effective than fossil fuel powered vehicles and equipment due to their lower operating costs. If passed, CUPE BC will be the second labour organization to support a RTOCEV, with CUPE Local 873, The Ambulance Paramedics of BC, being the first.

A Just Transition for Workers

This resolution calls for CUPE BC to lobby government to create a plan for a just transition for workers in the fossil fuel sectors to a green energy sector. It was also a close runner up for our priority resolution. We saw these resolutions as important for many reasons, but one unique reason for CUPE BC is the number of our members who work in communities that are reliant on a fossil fuel-based economy. Ensuring there is work for fossil fuel-based workers in the green economy provides security for our members who work in these communities. The federal government has made a significant commitment to creating a plan for a just transition during the composition of this report and, though the provincial government's CleanBC plan does include this concept, more details and prioritization are needed to meet this challenge in BC.

Increased Public Funding for Public Transit

The transportation sector is among the greatest sources of greenhouse gas emissions and a significant portion of these emissions come from passenger vehicles. There is already a better alternative—one that is publicly run, affordable, and addresses public inequities—and that is public transportation. For public transportation to realize its tremendous potential to address climate change, it requires greater government support. CUPE has a strong relationship with this issue, our members work in transit, and, in far greater numbers, our members rely on transit. A campaign for improved transit addresses our goals for the climate, our goals for worker mobility and access, our goals for a more fair and equitable society, and our goals for affordability. The Committee views this resolution as one that unifies many key priorities for CUPE BC.

Conclusion

The Environment Committee recognizes there are multiple stressors facing CUPE BC members today, including the climate crisis, and while many of our members are extremely worried about this crisis, there are others who are more concerned about other challenges we face. The

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Committee recognizes that others still are not at all concerned about climate change, or even view it as a threat to their livelihood.

The Committee believes that urgent climate action is of utmost importance to our members, and that as the CUPE National policy articulates, the time to act is now. Further, we recognize that this action must include work within our internal culture in addition to working with the community, to ensure we act in a unified manner and that there is solidarity in our words and actions on this critical topic. It will be our continued goal to foster a culture of sustainability within CUPE BC while taking into consideration the sensitivities of all members and to help cultivate CUPE BC into a powerful force for a sustainable climate. We believe that the result will be a happier and healthier membership, because, if nothing else, being part of the solution to a problem is often a cure to the anxiety induced by the problem, and hope is always better than fear.

Respectfully submitted:

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