

How Workers Can Demand Climate Justice

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A Bargaining for the Common Good approach to the climate crisis



Jake May/The Flint Journal-MLive.com/AP

A crew digs out and replaces lead service lines in Flint, Michigan, 2018. Lead in public water supplies is a tremendous health hazard to residents in frontline communities from Newark to Flint to the Navajo Reservation and beyond.

As Greenland experiences a record melt, Europe recovers from record-breaking heat, California braces for another fire season, and Puerto Rico still struggles to rebuild nearly two years after Hurricane Maria, it is becoming ever clearer how profoundly the climate crisis is changing everything, and how imperative it is that we act *now* if we hope to avert an existential disaster. The latest report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finds that if greenhouse gas emissions continue at the current rate, the atmosphere will warm by as much as 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels by 2040. This will submerge coastlines, intensify droughts and wildfires, increase the frequency and strength of extreme storms, and worsen food shortages and poverty. The report also states that these dire consequences will come to pass well within the lifetime of most readers of this article.

We no longer have time to continue the “jobs versus environment” debate that has distracted us from acting with the boldness this moment requires. Saving our deteriorating environment *is the job* of our time. The Green New Deal resolution introduced to Congress by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey has spurred a wave of activism. And while it is important to channel that energy into electing a president and Senate that will treat the crisis as a crisis, it's equally important that we fight climate change locally, from below.

Workers, people of color, Native peoples, and the poor have borne and will continue to bear the brunt of this crisis if we don't find the means to avert it. We must forge alliances that can fight for climate justice and a sustainable and resilient future. That will require working together across movements and organizations toward a common purpose.

Fortunately, we have a tool at hand that can help us build those alliances and organize those fights locally. It is called Bargaining for the Common Good.

Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) is an innovative way of building community-labor alignments, bringing unions and allies together, that go beyond the limits to traditional collective bargaining and jointly shape bargaining campaigns that advance the mutual interests of workers and communities alike. It developed over the last decade out of the struggles of teachers in St. Paul, Chicago, and Seattle; out of the fights of public employees in San Diego and Los Angeles; and in other settings where unions partnered with their community allies to advance a common agenda through direct-action protests—including strikes—and campaigns that targeted the power structures of their communities.

The strike by members of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) in January 2019 provides a great example of what BCG looks like in action. The union tackled issues that were central to the working-class communities the school district serves. The teachers won commitments from the district to reduce class sizes, increase investment in the schools, hire school nurses and full-time librarians, reduce standardized testing and random searches of students, provide more green spaces for students, and launch a dedicated hotline for immigrant families who need legal assistance.

These “common good” bargaining demands were crafted in collaboration with parents, students, and allied community organizations like the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), many months before the union contract expired. The union carried these demands into the streets as it took its members on strike against the austerity agenda of some members of the district board and district Superintendent Austin Beutner (a former investment banker with no prior experience in education). By striking over this list of community-generated demands and with the support of a dense network of allies, the teachers moved bargaining away from the union-versus-taxpayer framework typically used to characterize such public-worker contract disputes and into one in which the UTLA was the spearhead of a community effort to reshape L.A.'s broader priorities.

As the UTLA example reveals, BCG campaigns seek to increase investment in underserved communities and confront structural inequalities—not simply to agree on a union contract. To date, BCG campaigns have been launched around issues of education, racial justice, public services, immigration, finance, housing, and privatization. But they are in many ways perhaps best suited to taking on the overarching existential issue that intersects with and often exacerbates all of these other issues: human-caused climate change.

In a recent [article](#), Nato Green of SEIU Local 1021 called for unions to bargain over climate change. Green argued that the introduction of the Green New Deal resolution by Ocasio-Cortez and Markey opened the possibilities of constructing a common good framework through which to confront the climate catastrophe. We agree.

There are three areas in which BCG campaigns can help us link to existing climate justice work on the local level and move action agendas that are not dependent on Washington:

- *Climate change mitigation*—reducing greenhouse gas emissions, with a just transition for workers, in order to slow global warming;
- *Environmental equity*—pursuing an equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens in order to eradicate the legacy of environmental racism; and
- *Just recoveries*—putting the interests of communities and workers before private profits in the wake of climate disasters, such as extreme storms and wildfires, and economic disasters, such as mine and plant closures.

BCG campaigns in these three areas can effectively link local efforts to national campaigns and begin to make the Green New Deal happen locally, from the ground up, while we also continue to fight for the change that is needed at the federal level.

Demanding Climate Change Mitigation

In the last decade, as the movement to shift away from fossil fuel consumption has gathered momentum, many unions; networks like the Labor Network for Sustainability, Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, and the BlueGreen Alliance; and local coalitions like the Connecticut Roundtable on Climate and Jobs have pushed for climate mitigation efforts. They've demanded cuts in carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions, though at the level of the federal government, these efforts have largely been blocked by the fossil fuel corporations, Wall Street, and other powerful actors.

At the same time, however, states such as California, and cities like New York, have taken steps to address the problem, including establishing emissions reductions targets that are in line with climate science. There is ample reason to move aggressively at the state and local level in conjunction with national efforts to establish a Green New Deal. In local settings, BCG campaigns can challenge the purveyors of climate catastrophe head-on. In partnership with local environmental organizations and climate change activists, unions can develop demands and organize contract campaigns that seek reductions in emissions by their employers, which include large public and private institutions, such as universities, hospitals, and schools. Unions can demand the formation of joint labor-management committees on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction. Such committees can be tasked with assessing the employer's emissions profiles and developing climate action plans to reduce GHG emissions, including enforceable targets. When fossil fuel facilities are closed, climate and community groups can play a role in converting those jobs into jobs that repair the damage to their communities. Instead of relying on politicians who may be too fearful to establish enforceable targets, workers can persuade, or if need be, force their employers to do so.

Unions and allies can also demand divestment of pensions and endowments from fossil fuel companies and move those funds instead into socially responsible investments. Other demands might include the expansion of public-transportation options, the free provision of mass transit to students or employees, and monetary or other incentives for workers who walk, bike, or use public transportation to commute to and from work. Provisions can be made for some workers to telecommute part-time to reduce unnecessary emissions on days when work can be completed remotely.

The demands of particular unions will likely be shaped by the sector in which they operate and their geographical location. For example, transportation workers might demand the electrification of bus fleets. Teachers and public employees can demand that public buildings be made energy-efficient and have publicly owned rooftop solar installed. Private-sector workers can demand electric-vehicle charging stations be installed in employee parking lots and garages and that 401(k) retirement plans include fossil-free investment options—or that all the company's plans be fossil-free.

Unions in Canada, parts of Europe, South Africa, and Australia have already begun to make climate mitigation demands at the bargaining table. A BCG approach in the United States would start with unions and local community groups working together to develop and articulate a set of demands that serve the interests of workers and the communities where they live and work. In this way, workers can become a positive force in the struggle to reduce GHG emissions.

Demanding Environmental Equity

As we have witnessed in the aftermath of Katrina, Sandy, Maria, and other extreme storms, working-class communities are the primary victims of climate catastrophe. Among the most severely impacted are those who are already most harmed by our economic and political systems: women and people of color. The government has also been less responsive when disasters hit these communities, as we have seen in Puerto Rico, New Orleans, and elsewhere—not surprisingly, considering the well-documented history of environmental racism and disinvestment in low-income communities. BCG can help expose and target the racial bias of climate injustice.

A recent study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, which explored “pollution inequity”—the difference between the environmental health damage caused by a racial-ethnic group and the damage that group experiences—found that air pollution exposure in the United States is disproportionately caused by consumption of goods and services by the non-Hispanic white majority, but disproportionately inhaled by black and Hispanic minorities. On average, non-Hispanic whites experience a “pollution advantage” of about 17 percent less air pollution exposure than is caused by their consumption, while blacks and Hispanics on average bear a “pollution burden” of 56 percent and 63 percent excess exposure, respectively, relative to the exposure caused by their consumption. The story is similar in Indian Country, where climate profiteers continue their efforts to despoil tribal lands with such oil pipeline projects as the Dakota Access and the Keystone XL. The majority of Superfund sites caused by fossil fuel extraction are located on tribal and public lands. Indigenous peoples are the only communities who have collectively owned lands that they govern without support for remediation. Those who’ve lived downstream from the capitalist machine have suffered the ill effects of polluted land, water, and air since the earliest days of industry.

Unions and community partners can make environmental justice issues a centerpiece of their bargaining campaigns to secure an equitable distribution of environmental *burdens*. Lead in public water supplies is a tremendous health hazard to residents in frontline communities from Newark to Flint to the Navajo Reservation and beyond. In these communities, workers and community activists can together demand the repair or replacement of poisoned water pipelines not just in the workplace, but in the entire community. They can demand the cleanup of the groundwater and aquifers that feed those pipelines. Unions and community members near bus depots and other public-transportation hubs can demand the electrification of vehicles in order to reduce asthma-causing particulate matter pollution as well as GHG emissions. Demands over shift start and end times and parking-lot locations can be used to reduce traffic congestion and the resultant dangerous air quality so common in communities adjacent to industrial areas and highways.

Following the lead of the United Steelworkers and some local labor-environmental coalitions like the New Jersey Work Environment Council, unions in manufacturing, mining, and chemical plants can demand the right to know the names and health impacts of all chemicals used within the plant and demand that the same information be shared with the local community. Joint labor-management-community committees can be established to monitor and reduce pollution levels. When a less toxic chemical can be used in production processes, it should be mandated, regardless of cost differences.

Unions and community partners can also demand an equitable distribution of environmental *benefits*. For example, workers can demand more green spaces in urban communities or the construction of bike paths or walking trails. To ensure the economic benefits of the traditionally pollution-heavy energy and manufacturing sectors are shared equitably after they are made greener, unions and community partners can demand that a percentage of the new hires be from the local community where the facilities are located. Toward this goal, a union apprenticeship program can be established to create a jobs pipeline for local residents where fossil fuel industries have closed. In Indian Country, BCG should endeavor to build broad solidarity with tribal communities to ensure the rightful role of the federal government in regulation and remediation of environmental issues.

Demanding Just Recoveries

Each year, climate disasters and industrial disasters, such as pipeline leaks, upend millions of lives, and cost billions of dollars in damage. And in 2018 alone, there were 14 separate “billion-dollar disasters” that cost communities one billion dollars or more in damage. This year, experts are already forecasting a more-than-active hurricane season. Meanwhile, California communities brace for fires, and Midwest communities for floods—all part of the “new normal.”

Hurricane Katrina taught us that disasters are not experienced equally—due in part to the way our nation’s relief efforts are designed. Disaster relief and recovery dollars, including FEMA aid, are tied to race, homeownership, and education. Wealthy and disproportionately white men make money during recoveries; poor black and brown people lose money. Under the cover of disaster, wealth is redistributed upwards.

Indeed, climate catastrophes provide opportunities to create even more inequality. After Hurricane Katrina, for example, the federal government suspended the Davis-Bacon Act and affirmative action in contracting, while New Orleans decertified the teachers union—all under the cover of disaster recovery.

But workers and communities have opportunities as well. After Katrina, and since, movements for just recovery and equitable rebuilding have emerged. After Superstorm Sandy hit New York, the New York State Nurses Association contributed labor and resources to helping neighbors. After Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, the teachers unions did the same. The impulse to provide aid and alleviate immediate suffering can be translated into long-term engagement that can lead to more-egalitarian structural change.

Communities seeking to rewrite the rules of disaster response to achieve greater resilience and equity can begin by drafting a “disaster recovery bill of rights” to inform and help move “contracts for recovery” for workers and local communities. These contracts for recovery could be drafted collaboratively by local unions in the public or private sector in partnership with community organizations and pushed for adoption in contract bargaining campaigns and at the municipal, county, or state level of government. They could include a set of protections for workers and community members, such as the right to living wages for cleanup workers and the right to return home for residents without eviction or job loss. They could establish local water or land use codes by local entities. They could also help to ensure a just transition for workers who face job loss and communities that are economically devastated by plant or factory closures. Fighting for these new rules for recovery locally through BCG campaigns could coincide with and reinforce ongoing union legislative efforts to expand the social safety net, including more public money in unemployment insurance and food stamps, new social supports such as universal health care coverage, and a public jobs program, as well as protections of tribal sovereignty—much-needed before a disaster, and all the more necessary after. These new rules—or disaster recovery rights—could also reinvent housing, transportation, education, environmental impact monitoring, and health care systems to serve working-class and tribal communities.

Building Climate Solidarity

Although there has been a decline in density, unions still bargain in several key sectors of the economy. By broadening labor’s standing demands for worker health and safety to include climate justice concerns, BCG campaigns can open an important new front for challenging the financial institutions and corporate actors that are driving the dual crisis of climate and inequality.

Bringing environmental and racial justice, tribal communities, and community partners into the union bargaining process can help labor build worker power, revitalize the U.S. labor movement, and address broader societal problems that have not been resolved through legal or governmental

processes. It will also allow for deep education and engagement with union members. By organizing locally and nationally in unions—across all sectors and industries—and using the collective bargaining process as a powerful tool, we can transform the discourse and ultimately the policy of the labor movement and generate support for important efforts such as the Green New Deal. Most important, we can flip the narrative and make workers and communities not the victims of climate catastrophe, but the protagonists in the struggle for a just, democratic, and truly sustainable world.