

Labor at table in U.S. plans to slow global warming

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Global warming isn't coming. It's already here.

From floods to forest fires, droughts to melting permafrost, rising global average temperature is having an impact. The scientific consensus is that human activity is contributing by increasing the amounts of so-called "greenhouse gases" in the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases exist in small concentrations in the atmosphere but have big impacts on temperature. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is the best-known greenhouse gas, but there are others, including methane and nitrous oxide.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a scientific body, was formed by the United Nations in 1988 to study the risk of human-caused climate change. Its latest report, in 2007, notes the observed increase in global temperatures in the last half century, paralleling the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Temperatures have risen about 1 degree Fahrenheit since the mid-20th century, while CO₂ concentrations have risen to 380 parts per million (ppm) from 315 ppm in 1960.

There's a special urgency to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases being added to the atmosphere because of concern about a possible tipping point, where increased temperatures themselves lead to additional releases of greenhouse gases. For instance, hotter, drier forests would be more likely to burn, releasing even more CO₂ and reducing the forests' ability

to convert atmospheric CO₂ into oxygen. Higher temperatures could also speed up the already melting Alaskan permafrost and the vast Siberian peat bogs, which could result in further release of CO₂ and methane, a more potent greenhouse gas.

There's a lot of scientific uncertainty about when a tipping point would be reached, but the international community is hoping that by limiting CO₂ concentration to below 500 ppm (and temperature increase to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit over current levels), it can be averted.

The reason you're reading about this in a labor union newspaper is that there are a lot of measures societies can take to achieve the targeted reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and which ones, and how, will have major impacts on workers throughout the economy. Some industries will be endangered, some will be transformed, and some will see tremendous growth.

The United States is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, adding an estimated 7.2 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent to the atmosphere in 2005 — about 22 percent of the world's total. Part of it is driving: The average American uses 500 gallons of gas a year to drive 12,000 miles, producing five tons of carbon dioxide. But electricity generation, industry, farming, and residential use of fossil fuels also contribute. U.S. greenhouse gas emissions are on track to increase one-third by 2030, but that trend will have to turn around if the world is to limit CO₂ to 500 ppm.

Government can limit greenhouse gas emissions by regulation, or discourage emissions indirectly by taxing them (the so-called "carbon tax" proposal). But a third approach is the one that is gaining the most political support. It's known as "cap and trade."

Under a cap-and-trade system, the government sets a limit or "cap" on the volume of greenhouse gases that certain sectors of the economy would be allowed to emit, and issues a permit for each unit of those emissions. Each year, the number of permits — and thus allowable greenhouse gas emissions — would be ratcheted down. The government would give or auction off the permits to emitters, and emitters could trade the permits to each other in a regulated marketplace. Companies that can make reductions cheaply would sell their unused permits to companies that had a tougher time cutting emissions. Thus, the market in permits would allow the necessary reductions to be made as cheaply as possible.

Both presidential hopefuls Barack Obama and John McCain support the cap-and-trade idea; Obama would auction the permits, while McCain proposes giving them away. Giving them away limits industries' economic pain. Auctioning generates resources that can be used to speed the transition and cushion the hardships.

So far, the cap-and-trade proposal that came closest to passing as the Climate Security Act of 2008, a bill introduced by Senators Joseph Lieberman (I-Conn.), John Warner (R-Va.) and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.). The Lieberman-Warner bill would start by giving three-quarters of the permits away and auctioning the remainder, but the percentage auctioned would go up each year. The Senate debated the bill in June, but failed to get enough votes to shut off debate and move to a vote. No one expected the bill to become law, because it didn't have enough support to overcome a filibuster, much less override a threatened presidential veto. The debate was seen as an airing of the issues likely to come up when the proposal comes back next year.

Organized labor was involved in the behind-the-scenes debate over the bill, and was able to get the bill's sponsors to incorporate a number of union proposals, including a major expansion of the Davis-Bacon prevailing wage requirement to non-federal alternative energy projects. The AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department, and the Laborers and Operating Engineers unions support the bill.

Labor unions wanted assurance that increasing costs for U.S. manufacturers won't drive production to countries that don't have the climate controls. So the Lieberman-Warner bill included steps the United States could take if countries like China don't also adopt restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions. Any country that

had not capped emissions after the United States begins the program would need to buy allowances in order to sell energy-intensive goods in the U.S. market.

And answering concerns labor leaders raised about potential for speculative abuse in the market for permits, Lieberman-Warner would set up a working group to propose regulations to protect the market from fraud and manipulation.

Unions also wanted benefits for workers who end up losing jobs because of cap-and-trade. Under Lieberman-Warner, companies wouldn't get permits if they achieve reductions simply by closing down operations and laying off workers. But some workers are likely to be displaced, particularly in the extraction and transport of coal and at coal-burning electricity plants. Lieberman-Warner would use revenues from the auction of permits to provide a bridge to retirement for older workers and retraining benefits for younger workers. The revenues would also fund:

- Major investments in technology to contain and store carbon dioxide produced at the coal-burning plants;
- Research and development of renewable energy, including cellulosic biomass;
- Grants and other incentives for conversion to renewable energy and increases in the energy efficiency of buildings, appliances, and manufacturing;
- Utility relief for low and middle-

income Americans.

Above all, union leaders approach cap-and-trade as a way to revitalize America's manufacturing and support good-paying jobs in the shift to a low-carbon economy.

"Solving the climate change crisis is an opportunity to address the manufacturing crisis," said AFL-CIO Energy Task Force co-chair Bob Baugh at a House Energy subcommittee in June.

In a statement released in March, the AFL-CIO Executive Council outlined some potentially bountiful sources of green-collar jobs: modernization of high-voltage transmission lines to increase energy efficiency; expansion of mass transit and passenger rail; energy efficiency retrofits of public, industrial and commercial buildings; weatherization of homes; and development of new automotive technologies, not to mention wind, solar and geothermal.

The Lieberman-Warner cap-and-trade program would cover almost nine-tenths of the sources of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and would be projected to reduce total U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions to roughly 5.8 billion tons a year by 2020 and 2.7 billion tons by 2050.

"Our nation can lead a new technological revolution in the way energy is generated and used," Baugh told the House subcommittee. "That can be of benefit to the world as a whole, and serve as a foundation for the revival of the middle class in the United States."

SEIU Local 49 finalizes contracts covering 1,900 Portland janitors

Service Employees (SEIU) Local 49 in July finalized two contracts covering about 1,900 of the Portland-area's 2,300 union janitors. A master agreement with nine employers covers 1,700 workers, and a first-ever contract with a local ServiceMaster franchise covers about 200 employees.

The four-year master agreement includes employer-provided health insurance for janitors' children, for the first-time, with employees paying \$40 of the monthly premium. The employee-only portion of the insurance is fully-paid by the employer. Top hourly wages will rise \$1.85 over the four years, from \$10.60 to \$12.45. Newly hired janitors start at 40 cents above minimum wage and reach the top of the scale after two years. The starting wage was 20 cents above minimum in the previous contract, which expired June 30. Workers also get one new paid "personal day" a year besides the seven paid holidays they had.

Members voted 542-16 to approve the new master agreement, which cov-

ers eight janitorial contractors, plus the non-profit Portland Habilitation Center.

The contract with the ServiceMaster franchise brings to a close a three-year union recognition campaign. During the campaign, janitors and their supporters held frequent pickets outside offices cleaned by the contractor, including buildings owned by Melvin Mark Companies. In the end, the employer agreed to grant union recognition on the basis of majority sign-up, and negotiated a contract that is similar to the master agreement, except that it starts with lower wages and benefits, catching up over the first three years. At that point the two sides will negotiate over wages in the final year.

Union contractors are in the higher end of the building services market — Class A commercial office buildings in downtown Portland and Vancouver, plus Intel in Hillsboro. Local 49 estimates that union contractors have 76 percent, by square footage, of the downtown Portland Class A market, said organizer Maggie Long.

Labor Day Picnics Monday, Sept. 1, 2008

Astoria — 50th annual picnic at Cullaby Lake Park (8.5 miles south of Astoria). Noon — 4 p.m. Sponsored by International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 50. Call 503-325-2271 for more information. (This will be their last one.)

Bend — Picnic at Pioneer Park in Bend. Noon-5 p.m. Sponsored by the Central Oregon Central Labor Council. Contact Fernando Gapsin at 503-701-6701 or Jerry Fletcher at 541-350-0265 for more information.

Eugene/Springfield — Picnic at Jasper Park in Jasper. Noon. Sponsored by the Lane County Central labor Council. Contact Pat Riggs-Henson, 541-746-5905 or 541 915-3100 for more information.

Medford — Picnic at TouVelle State Park in White City. 11 a.m. — dusk. Sponsored by the Southern Oregon Central Labor Council. Call Carol Bennett at 541-664-0804 for more information.

North Bend — Picnic at Ferry Street Park in North Bend. 11 a.m. — 3 p.m. Sponsored by the Southwestern Oregon Central Labor Council. Call Robert Westerman at 541-756-3907 or Shawn Jennings at 541-396-3244 for more information.

Portland — Labor Day Picnic at Oaks Amusement Park in Southeast Portland. 10 a.m. — 5 p.m. Sponsored by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council. Call 503-235-9444 for more information.

Salem — Oregon State Fair. The Oregon AFL-CIO labor booth in the Central Canopy area continues to be staffed with union volunteers during the entire two weeks of the fair, including Labor Day.