



Labor's Response to the Climate Crisis-A Discussion Forum

In October, U.S. Labor Against the War sponsored a conference call with Joe Uehlein, President and Executive Director of the Labor Network for Sustainability, and Sean Sweeney, Co-Director of the Global Labor Institute, University School of Industrial Labor Relations, on the topic of *Labor's Response to the Climate Crisis*. As a follow-up, USLAW is hosting an on-line discussion forum on its website (<http://uslaboragainstwar.org>).

What follows is the opening comment to which participant responses are invited.

[Economic Conversion - From Addiction to Sustainability](http://bit.ly/addiction2sustainability)

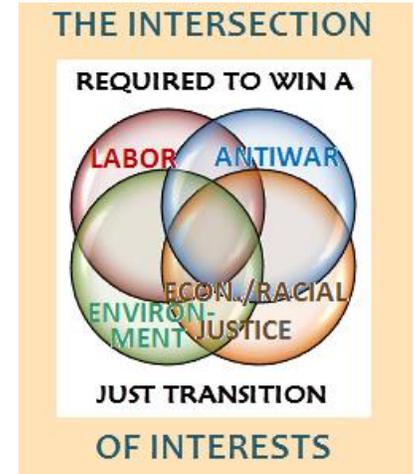
<http://bit.ly/addiction2sustainability>

The article can be boiled down to a set of propositions, which I have done. They are available here:

[Twenty Propositions for Economic Conversion and Just Transition](http://bit.ly/20propositions)

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The way I see this is perhaps best portrayed by a Venn diagram of overlapping but distinct areas of interest and concerns. I've also expressed the idea as streams or currents of progressive struggle and the need from them to flow together to create a river for change because no one of them is sufficiently strong enough to accomplish its objectives without the involvement of the others.



The Pentagon and the military-industrial sector that feeds and feeds off of it together are the largest consumers of fossil fuels and create the single largest source of CO2 emissions on the planet. And, of course, war is itself a horrific source of environmental degradation.

The military provides the enforcement arm for the oil cartel and multinational corporations that guarantees them access to and control of carbon-based resources that generate a substantial proportion of global warming pollutants, and provoke competition for resources and displacement of populations that create the conflicts that lead to war. To be able to effectively get control over the energy corporations, we must demilitarize US foreign policy and our posture as global hegemon. To be able to dismantle the military-industrial complex, we must take on the energy sector interest that depend on it.

The antiwar movement must become an environmental movement, and the environmental movement must become an antiwar movement, and both of those must be in alliance with the movement for economic equality and racial justice and the labor movement must be involved in all three.

The labor, antiwar and environmental movements share in common the concept of just transition. The requirements for a just transition in each case (energy sector and military sector) are much the same, or at least closely aligned. Any plan to wean the nation from its reliance on fossil fuels must also dismantle the industrial complex's domination of both our economy and politics. Workers and unions in both sectors face a common challenge that can only be met if their struggles are linked together.

The fourth leg of this stool (sorry for switching metaphors) is the movement for economic and racial justice. The poor and people of color live and work in some of the most polluted environments, and face similar barriers to entry for jobs in both the energy and military sectors. Any plan for transformation must also become a plan for remedying historic patterns of racial and class limitations on their opportunities for good jobs at living wages and representation by strong unions. Just transition must serve also as a means to reverse the widening economic polarization between an economic, social and political elite and the rest of society.

And as we are so painfully reminded of late, the communities of color are also the target of increasingly militarized police agencies that are becoming directly linked to, influenced and equipped by, and operate like the military institutions dedicated to waging war. To put it simply, a militarized police see the community as a battlefield and its residents as the "enemy" to be vanquished or potential adversary to be controlled. A militarized police functions as an army of occupation or a state-sanctioned militia answerable to the economic

and political elite, not the people who pay their salaries. They "protect and serve" the elite and repress and control the community.

Four overlapping circles. Four legs of a stool. Four currents or streams of struggle that must find their way to become a common powerful river for social change.

The path from where we are today to the demilitarized, sustainable and just economy we seek requires transition – one that does not ask workers and their communities now dependent on carbon energy or military industry sector jobs to bear alone the social cost of making that transition. They should have a voice with community allies in planning for a transition that protects their economic welfare and the economic health of their communities, as it meets society's numerous urgent needs.

Just transition, however, calls for more than plans that protect the economic and social interests of military or energy sector workers alone. Those plans should take into account the employment and social needs of the larger community so that those at the bottom of the economic ladder are also provided a path to economic security. In other words, just transition seeks to raise the standard of living for everyone rather than protecting the standard of living only of those military and energy sector workers whose jobs are impacted by changing national social, political and budget priorities.

The components of a plan for a just transition need to be defined, and I hope that this discussion forum will begin to do that. It may include technology and product substitution, retraining, relocation assistance, subsidized education and other labor market reforms. But it may also require changes in forms of ownership and control, including formation of new businesses based on cooperatives, employee or community-owned and co-managed businesses.

In this respect, just transition must necessarily involve a broad expansion of democratic participation in decision making about the economy and government policies. It will require a political and social transformation as much as an economic one.

The challenges we face include developing broad awareness among working people and economically and socially disadvantaged and oppressed sectors of society of the relationship between environmental security and economic security, and the impact that a militarized foreign policy and the military-industrial complex have on the environment as well as our economic and social welfare. This calls for a new definition of "national security" – one that is not measured by the size, power and lethality of our military, but by the social welfare and standard of living of our society, our communities and our people.

National security must also involve raising the standard of living and economic and social welfare of people around the world. Our real security will be strengthened by closing the 1000 or more foreign military installations which have little to do with protecting us and everything to do with protecting the economic and political interests of the 1% who benefit from the exploitation of labor and resources that those bases make possible.

In transforming our economy, we will necessarily also have to transform our society, and our relationships with the rest of the world. This calls upon us to heed Rev. Martin Luther King's admonishment:

"We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin ... the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered." —from his speech at Riverside Church on Apr. 4, 1967 in opposition to the Vietnam War, one year before he was assassinated.

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To view the discussion forum, click on the Labor Response to Climate Crisis Forum poster on the USLAW website home page. To post a comment in the discussion, open a User account. Follow instructions at <http://bit.ly/USLAWClimateForum>

