

A charter for one million new climate jobs

Gareth Dale outlines proposals for a major increase in employment in the UK climate sector.

There is a discrepancy between the urgent imperative of mitigating climate change and the stumbling efforts of political leaders. Already, it appears that even the dramatic predictions of the 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were overly cautious. For example, the Met Office has warned of a possible 7°C warming by the end of the century if emissions follow a business-as-usual trajectory.¹ The danger is that long before this point – in fact, beyond about 2°C – thresholds may be reached after which positive feedback mechanisms accelerate warming beyond human control. Sadly, this prospect did not seem overly to trouble the diplomats and politicians as they hammered out the very weak agreement at Copenhagen.

More broadly, the policy regime on emissions reduction, as it has emerged over recent years in the EU and elsewhere, is inadequate. It centres on the creation of markets in carbon emissions, the idea being that this ‘carbon trading’ is the most economically efficient mechanism for achieving the necessary reductions. In reality, the record of carbon trading has been abject. In the EU, lax targets have led to corporations failing to make significant reductions. Even the reductions that are claimed are in doubt because of difficulties in externally verifying the corporations’ emissions data.

In short, the current market-centred policy regime is counterproductive. What is needed is concerted state intervention focused upon investment in public works and cleaner, more efficient energy. Not only would this be much more effective, but it would also demonstrate that mitigating climate change goes hand in hand with social justice and improvements in living conditions.

‘National Climate Service’

In Britain, the Campaign Against Climate Change, backed by several national trade unions, has published a report sketching out how one million ‘climate jobs’ can be created.² It outlines a programme for building a green-energy economy, for renovating and insulating our homes and buildings, and for providing comprehensive public transport. A million new climate jobs in the UK will not solve all the current economic problems, but it will take a million people off the dole and put them to work saving the future.

How can such an ambitious programme be put into effect? Our proposal is for something similar to the way in which the government used to run the National Health Service. In effect, the government sets up a National Climate Service, and the new NCS hires staff to do the work that needs to be done. We are aware that this may not be politically possible, and part of the work will probably be done by contractors. But we want the government to control the project, so that it makes sure it happens, rather than placing faith in ‘market forces’.

Where will the jobs be created? Some of the key sectors and occupations are:

- Manufacturing and running buses and trains, and constructing new rail lines.
- Insulating buildings and installing solar heating.
- Constructing, transporting, assembling and maintaining offshore wind and marine turbines, and solar photo-voltaic cells.
- Manufacturing and erecting long-distance cables and pylons.
- Training and education in the necessary skills for all the above jobs.

And how could it be paid for? In some ways, the model for what we want to do is what happened in World War II. Then the great powers of the world took control of their economies and directed industry to make as many weapons as possible, as fast as possible. The rearmament boom did not bankrupt the governments. Instead, it created jobs and lifted the world out of the Great Depression.

We need to do the same thing now, but the focus would be on *saving* lives. Our estimates suggest that we can employ a million workers for ten years for less than the government gave the banks in one year. This is because a million climate jobs will not really cost the government all that much. The net figure would be in the order of £20 billion per year. There are several ways the government can find this sort of money. If the richest 1% each paid just 5% more income tax, that would raise £5 billion per year. The government could also borrow money or create it through ‘quantitative easing.’ It is sometimes argued that printing money produces hyperinflation. In the last year the Bank of England spent around £175 billion on ‘quantitative easing’ without creating significant problems. The figures we are proposing are much smaller.

Campaigning for change

How to proceed? The government will not easily be won to this programme. But if we mobilise a national

campaign, then it can be won. The precedent in this country was when the unions founded the Labour Party, and used it to fight for a health service and a welfare state. But trade unionists and environmentalists cannot win this campaign alone; they will have to enlist support from a wide range of organisations, from faith groups to parent teacher associations to local councillors.

Action can be of many kinds. One example is to instate union environmental representatives in all workplaces. While they are generally not yet recognised by management, we can push for this and then, through them, persuade employers to spend more money on climate activities.

The most important kind of action, though, will be to defend jobs at workplaces threatened with mass redundancies or closure. The recent campaign against the closure of the Vestas wind turbine blade factory on the Isle of Wight is one example. But we also need to challenge closures in other sectors, and to call for the conversion to more eco-friendly jobs. For example in the automotive industry, we can push for retooling to build electric buses or cars.

This means we can campaign for a million new climate jobs both from the top down – through changes to government policy – and from the bottom up – from workplace to workplace. Together, we can protect both jobs and the environment.

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This article is based on a presentation given at the 2009 SGR conference.

References

1. Met Office (2008). Avoiding dangerous climate change. <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/publications/brochures/cop14.pdf>
2. Campaign Against Climate Change (2009). One million climate jobs now! <http://www.campaigncc.org/greenjobs> (A more in-depth report will be published in early 2010)