

Global Issues

Slowly climbing a slippery slope: Trade unions at COP

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To start with, a clarification. This piece is a reflection on the role of the trade union movement in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process, including its annual Conference of the Parties (COP). I write it as someone who has been engaging in COPs as part of the global trade union delegation for the past four years. And it's important to stress: for the labour movement, climate action is not reducible to the UNFCCC. Whatever trade unions decide to do or not do inside the COP process, there is an enormous need for climate activism in a range of other spaces, from the workplace to national politics.

That being said, I will argue that trade unions should continue to engage in COPs, as it is a key forum where the new climate economy is being shaped. Although I recognise the many failings and structural weaknesses of the COP process, with Brazil taking up the COP30 Presidency this year, this would be a bad time to withdraw from it.

COP29: Another Low Ebb for the UNFCCC

In November 2024 in Baku, in the middle of the 29th UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (also known as COP29), the Club of Rome (2024) published an open letter calling for urgent reforms to the COP process. The letter – signed by such climate luminaries as the former UNFCCC executive secretary, Christina Figueres – called for much tighter restrictions on which countries can hold the COP Presidency, a shift away from large negotiations to smaller “solution-driven meetings”, and for the ever-expanding army of fossil fuel lobbyists to be reined in.

Surprisingly, there was some unease about the letter across the rights-based civil society constituencies – the environmental NGOs, the women and gender constituency, Indigenous Peoples, youth organisations and the trade unions – who effectively constitute the global climate left in the COP process. Although the critique was generally supported, there was anxiety that the letter came at the wrong time, with the long awaited and sorely needed climate finance deal in its final negotiations. Did the letter play into the hands of those forces looking to sabotage the process entirely? This highlighted a dilemma facing the climate left. For all the criticisms of the ailing COP process, does it ultimately need to be defended?

A Weak Deal on Climate Finance

COP29 did eventually produce a deal on climate finance, but it will go down as one of the most disappointing COP outcomes to date. The purpose of the deal was for the Global North to bridge the enormous funding gap faced by the Global South when it comes to building low emitting and

resilient climate economies. In 2009, Global North countries had pledged to mobilise US\$100 billion per year, but Global North countries themselves had long recognised that this amount fell woefully short of the Global South's actual needs. Therefore in 2021, COP26 decided that a new climate finance deal, the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), should be agreed at COP29.

The US\$300 billion per year agreed at COP29 drew stinging criticisms from all sides. In the *Financial Times*, Martin Wolf (2024) wondered if the deal should be called a failure or a disaster. Responses from social movements were even more withering¹.

The first big problem with the deal was the quantity of finance. Even the final NCQG text recognised that Global South countries require a minimum US\$1.3 trillion per year. That itself was a low figure. Social movements in the PayUp coalition, which included the global trade union movement, argued that US\$5 trillion per year should be the baseline.

The second big problem was the quality of the finance. Global South countries argued that public finance, and specifically grants, needed to form the core of the NCQG. This was partly a moral argument. Why should Global South countries take on even debt more for a problem that they did not cause in the first place? However, the Baku agreement did not contain any commitments on the level of public grant financing, and it looks set to rely heavily on debt inducing loans from multilateral development banks and public-private finance initiatives.

There were deep structural reasons for the failure to produce even a halfway progressive deal in Baku. At a general level, rising geopolitical tensions were placing enormous strain on the very concept of multilateral co-operation. The ongoing war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza and the threat of wider conflict across the Middle East, and rising tensions between the US and China were all undermining the basis for co-operation between the Global North and Global South.

In the sphere of climate politics, teetering support for progressive climate measures in the Global North was also a hindering factor. At the current moment, it is difficult to point to a Global North government that has come to power with a strong mandate for more ambitious climate action. Global North governments have variously downplayed or watered down their climate policies, while days before COP29 began, Trump had been elected on a promise to rip up the US's climate commitments. COP29 was meant to be the moment that Global North governments put their money where their mouth is. But many of them were increasingly unwilling to even pay lip service to their responsibilities.

A related problem was that substantial cash transfers to the Global South have no place within the neo-liberal model, which for all its fragilities remains the dominant framework of the global political economy. There have been various attempts in recent years to put forward alternative models, from the Green New Deal, a Green Marshall plan, and degrowth, to various proposals for taxation reform including the Base Erosion and Profit Sharing project (BEPS), and Brazil's proposal to the G20 for a billionaires tax. But as the outcome of COP29 demonstrated, none of these have gained sufficient political momentum to change the narrative frame. As such, the NCQG negotiations were stuck within the neo-liberal framework, with its dual insistence that growth can be decoupled from emissions, and that private capital is the only viable source for funding for the green economy (if only regulators would get the incentives right).

It was always unlikely that Global North governments would massively increase financial resources within this political economic straitjacket. Admittedly, there is a chicken and egg problem here. Had COP29 delivered a deal with, say, US\$1 trillion per year in public climate finance, that would have been a small but tangible moment of departure from the neo-liberal framework. As it was, calls for the Global North to stump up cut no ice, regardless of the undeniable moral case.

¹ See https://climatenetwork.org/2024/11/23/cop29_betrayal_in_baku/

A Shutout for Workers

The trade unions also had an additional reason to be disappointed with the climate finance deal: the absence of strong commitments to labour rights. If the NCQG was a test of our ability to mainstream workers issues into a key operational COP agreement, and therefore shape the new climate economy, then Baku was a qualified failure. The final text did not contain a single mention of workers, although a reference to supporting just transitions did give us a slender platform to build on.

Getting strong workers' language in the NCQG seemed like an uphill task. Negotiators from both the Global North and Global South either refused to recognise the legitimate role of workers' issues in the climate finance negotiations, or were not willing to fight for their inclusion. This is a familiar challenge for trade unions in the COP process. Even if governments are nominally committed to workers' rights, COP negotiators often come from a Ministry of Environment or of Foreign Affairs and either have little understanding of or little sympathy for workers' issues.

Moreover, at COP29, generally workers' issues were cynically sacrificed by both the Global North and Global South blocs, as evidenced by the failure to agree any next steps on the Just Transition Work Programme agreed at COP28 (and which was the first UNFCCC text to recognise labour rights) (De Los Ríos Torres and De Wel, 2024). This dynamic carried over to the NCQG negotiations. References to workers' rights, social dialogue, and even an explicit reference to workers – things which had been fought for by trade unions in both the Global North and Global South in the 2 years preceding COP29 – were cut from the final text.

Where to After Baku?

The COP29 outcome suggests we are sliding further down a slippery slope, from what Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018) call the mode of Climate Leviathan – a planetary wide multi-lateral order that attempts to overcome capitalism's collective action problem – to the mode of the Climate Behemoth, similar to what George Monbiot (2020) calls a "warlord capitalism" where only the strongest survive in the ruins.

Mann and Wainwright argue that rather than trying to reform the Climate Leviathan (which arguably the UNFCCC attempts to be), or pursuing an anti-capitalist alternative (which they call Climate Mao), we should instead be pursuing something more nebulous, Climate X, which is based on climate action from the bottom up beyond the nation state system.

There is insufficient space here to discuss whether an anti-capitalist Climate Mao would be preferable to Climate X. But I will argue that we are in a hybrid mode between the planetary ambition of Climate Leviathan, and the partial action of Climate X.

I write this the day after the US has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement (for the second time). The withdrawal of the world's biggest historic emitter undoubtedly blows a massive hole in the Paris Agreement process, but perhaps it makes the underlying dynamic more explicit. Climate action was already partial and erratic. According to the United Nations Emissions Gap report, the world is currently on track for an increase of at least 2.6 degrees this century, well over the Paris Agreement's 1.5 degree target (UNEP, 2024). Arguably, it is the Paris Agreement's retreat from any centrally assigned targets that has brought us here, leaving it up to governments to decide for themselves what their responsibilities are.

This brings us back to Brazil, who will host COP30 in November 2025. After the bitter disappointments of COP29, we need to leverage all the opportunities a more progressive COP Presidency offers. A COP Presidency can build momentum around key themes, push through negotiating language, and galvanise a coalition of governments and social movements around a common agenda.

It is clear that Brazil wants to give COP30 a strong justice framing, including a focus on protecting the Amazon and the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Brazil has also shown signs that structural reforms to the global economy are needed, not least through its chairing of the G20 in 2024, when it called for an overhaul of the global taxation system.

Trade unions need to be in the middle of this process, making the case for why more power for workers is critical for more ambitious climate ambition. This starts with foregrounding workers' rights in key COP agreements, and making common cause with other social movements about the need for broader structural reforms. We should be under no illusions about the ongoing structural weaknesses of the COP process. However, whereas Matt Huber (2023) argues that we don't need better climate policies, but rather "a stronger working class", we don't have the luxury of divorcing the two. In fact, whatever gains trade unions can secure at COP will only be meaningful if leveraged by organising in the workplace. The COP process may include only a partial group of the key players, but is one of the spaces where the possibility of a new climate economy is being contested. Trade unions need to keep climbing this slippery slope. In Brazil, we have a little more grip.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Bert de Wel, Nicholas Pons-Vignon and one anonymous reviewer for their

helpful comments on earlier drafts; however any errors are my own.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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