



*Working harmoniously on the earth*  
CUPE's national environment policy

**CUPE**



**T**he Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) represents 627,000 workers in a wide variety of jobs. Many of these jobs have an environmental component, such as in municipal water work; compost, recycling and waste collection; energy generation and distribution and other jobs. CUPE members can help contribute to a greener workplace and world. Public sector work is integral to sustaining and enriching Canadian communities. CUPE has a responsibility, as a large organization, to set a positive environmental example through its own policies and procedures.





## 1. *Background*

**R**esponding to the climate crisis is among humanity's most urgent priorities now and over the coming decades. Climate change and other environmental problems are societal issues but their causes and impacts are not equally shared. Burning fossil fuels (mostly oil, coal, and natural gas) that emit greenhouse gases (GHGs—mostly carbon dioxide and methane) causes climate change. Greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere. Large sectors of the Canadian and international economy are based on, or related

to, fossil fuel extraction and industries that depend heavily on fossil fuels (e.g., automotive, mining, steel and many other big corporate enterprises). These sectors of our economy—with the private wealth behind them and the governments that support and promote them—contribute vast amounts of GHGs that have created the broader climate change problem. While all of humanity is confronted with climate change, not everyone contributes equally to the problem and not everyone is at equal risk for the consequences. Part of

CUPE's role environmentally is to push back against the economic and political forces responsible for the current environmental crisis. At the same time, we all inhabit the same planet and have a duty to be better environmental citizens.

CUPE members adopted a resolution at our 2011 convention (Resolution #94) calling on CUPE to develop an environmental policy to give direction to the union on climate change and set a course for future environmental work.<sup>1</sup> CUPE's environmental policy



provides guidance for the work we do and positions we take with governments, businesses, our employers and allies, with the objective of overcoming the environmental crisis. This policy also offers guidance for CUPE's own internal and operational environmental vision.

This policy contains statements in three main areas:

- Broader policy statements.
- Recommendations for CUPE workplaces where our members work.
- Recommendations for CUPE's operations.

The policy addresses today's core environmental issues as they affect all of our communities and

us. It informs CUPE members, the broader labour movement, policymakers and citizens about what constitute the best choices for sustainable work, while promoting universally-accessible public sector services. It promotes sustainability, sound environmental stewardship, conservation, and efficient use of natural resources.

Climate change is presently the most urgent environmental issue and will be for many years to come. Other core environmental issues are dealt with in this policy but climate change underscores each. Some other environmental issues (e.g., loss of biodiversity, deforestation, desertification, etc.) are not mentioned explicitly in this policy; this does not mean that these issues are not important.

## 2. *The environmental crisis*

**T**he science-based evidence is clear: the earth is warming. A warmer planet is less stable, hospitable, and less socio-economically balanced. Planetary temperatures on average have already warmed 0.8°C across the earth compared to pre-industrial levels.<sup>2</sup> This warming is not evenly distributed across the earth, nor will future warming be. Parts of Canada have already warmed well above the global average, such as in the far north.

The effects of climate change are clear. In every corner of

the world, there have been more frequent and intense storms, floods, prolonged droughts, wildfires, rapidly retreating glaciers, surging and rising seas, damaging invasive species, and other outcomes linked to a changing climate. These impacts affect human survival via decreased fresh water supplies, lower crop yields, destructive storms, wider disease vectors, and other outcomes. Despite decades of research, knowledge and awareness, very little has been done to cut greenhouse gases that cause climate change. As a result, the

planet is on course to warm by as much as 4-6°C by 2100 if serious steps to reduce GHGs don't start now.<sup>3</sup> This much warming would lead to disastrous climate conditions that would make large areas of the planet uninhabitable for humans, threaten global food supply and security, and other ruinous impacts.

Labour, environmental, and social justice groups have been calling for action on climate change for decades. New calls for action are increasingly broad, even from the banking and

insurance industries that recognize the significant economic stressors associated with climate change.

All other environmental issues are affected by climate change, from stressing compromised fresh water reserves, to jeopardizing fragile ecosystems, such as forests and coral reefs. The climate must be stabilized by decarbonizing our way of life if there is to be any hope of solving other environmental problems.

All CUPE workplaces will be affected by climate change. Existing public infrastructure (e.g., buildings, transportation, communications, electricity and water and social systems) is not ready to withstand the impacts from the greater risk of heat, droughts, floods and

storms brought on by global warming.

We are faced with three main challenges that must be fixed together. There is a clear environmental crisis. The economic system based on continuous growth is unsustainable. There are limits to an economy that seeks infinite growth in the face of finite resources. And there is an equity challenge, both globally and within Canada.

CUPE believes that affordable access to clean air, water, soil, and energy are fundamental human rights. Everyone has a right to live within a stable climate. To restore harmony with the earth, we must build an equitable society.



### 3. *CUPE's environmental vision*

**E**nsuring the vitality of the natural environment is a priority for CUPE. Many CUPE jobs are closely linked to the environment and all CUPE jobs can contribute to a greener world. As union members, we know the earth sustains all life. But we also know the earth is in trouble. Humans have not always been the best stewards of the natural environment. The air, water, soil, climate and all types of ecosystems have been damaged and degraded.

Climate change, in particular, is a critical environmental issue that compromises our jobs, communities, health, quality of life, food and water supplies. CUPE, with its influence and vision, is a progressive force for taking on environmental issues through education, activism, workplace and political action, and by setting a positive example. CUPE must apply an environmental lens to all its work and seriously consider the climate impacts of the union's decisions, policies and procedures.



## 4. *Environmental principles*

C UPE supports the following principles and values:

- Human beings must restore harmony and balance with the earth by understanding our interconnectedness with the earth and all living things. We must have an ecological approach to life that realizes that our lives rely on, and are linked to, the earth. We cannot abuse or misuse its resources.
- This policy supports the Aboriginal perspective that decisions we make today must consider the next seven generations and what is best for those generations. As each generation advances, it must continue to look seven generations ahead to ensure that a long-term, sustainable and holistic view is maintained.
- Sustainability is at the heart of this policy. Sustainability simply means the ability of humans to carry on by taking a balanced approach that does not unduly harm the earth or take too much from it so that it cannot be restored.
- All people have a right to access clean air, water, soil, and to energy to help sustain their lives.
- All people have the right to a stable climate.<sup>4</sup> Equality must underscore our environmental vision, so that all people can prosper. Our quality of life should be measured by how we enrich our community and help to preserve a liveable earth for all humanity.



- Ensuring the survival and good health of our planet is a moral and ethical requirement. We have a duty as good ecological citizens to maintain the vitality of the earth by being stewards of the earth. Environmental stewardship here simply means that we should treat the earth as if it is held in trust and leave it in no worse condition for future generations than we found it.
- To achieve environmental sustainability, our water, energy, transportation and other critical public services must be publicly owned and

operated to work for environmental objectives and the common good, rather than for private profit.

- Public sector work is often community-based. Many of our jobs put us in close proximity to the natural environment. CUPE members can, therefore, be good stewards of the earth in the same way we are good stewards of the workplace.
- Economic moves away from environmentally harmful to environmentally sustainable industries and practices should not be at the cost

of decent, meaningful work and jobs. There must be a just transition for workers and their communities. Just transition means training, education and job placement programs for workers who might lose their jobs because their work is made obsolete due to environmental reasons. CUPE strives to protect the rights of all working people. There are abundant opportunities for new work in a greener economy. The shift to sustainable work must include CUPE's vision that all people have a right to meaningful work.



## 5. *Environmental priorities and positions*

### 5.1 Climate change

The world is getting warmer because of human behaviour. Burning fossil fuels that emit greenhouse gases is the primary cause of climate change. To drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions we must immediately and significantly reduce the use of fossil fuels at the same time we must adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change that are already “locked in” because of GHG emissions already in the atmosphere.

CUPE supports actions to cut GHGs that cause climate change, while adapting to the impacts of climate change.

- We will work as a union to push Canadian governments and industries to reverse the degradation and destabilization of our environment.
- CUPE calls for GHG reductions across all spheres of Canadian society to limit planetary warming to no more than 1.5°C, which is

considered a manageable and realistic warming threshold, based on scientific evidence.<sup>5</sup>

- We will promote a move to an economy that favours renewable sources of public energy rather than energy derived from fossil fuels. We call for an end to government financial incentives and subsidies for the oil and gas industry. We call for a price to be applied to carbon emissions to send a clear signal that polluters must pay for the damage



they exact on climate systems. These steps will help push Canada to a low-carbon future.

- We will promote greener work practices that help cut GHGs.
- We will support new job growth in areas that help adapt to the impacts of climate change.
- We will continue to cut CUPE's operational greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging energy efficiency in all CUPE buildings and workplaces, reducing travel that damages the climate, promoting public transit for all

CUPE members and staff, using technologies that cut operational GHGs, reducing materials across all spheres of CUPE work, promoting procurement practices that are better for the climate and other steps.

## 5.2 Water

Water is necessary for human survival. It is also a core concern for CUPE, both from an environmental and a jobs perspective. All humans must have affordable access to publicly-supplied, clean drinking water to ensure human health and vitality. Water supply and quality is threatened with increasing scarcity due to climate

change, from contamination from industry, agriculture and other sources. Our water is threatened by privatization and trade deals that strive to turn this life-giving resource exclusively into a for-profit commodity. Water then becomes inaccessible for all but the wealthy in developed parts of the world.

CUPE is committed to protecting clean, accessible, publicly-owned and delivered fresh water.

- We will promote public municipal tap water over private, for-profit bottled water.

- We will oppose water privatization (including bottled water) and trade deals that promote the commodification of water.
- We will support access to reliable, safe, clean public water in all Canadian communities, including Aboriginal communities.
- We will promote water conservation and efficient use of existing and future water resources in all sectors of society, in CUPE workplaces and CUPE offices.
- We will push at all levels to slow climate change,

which has a huge impact on fresh water supply and quality, particularly in disadvantaged areas of the earth.

- We will work to protect water from contamination from all sources, particularly from industrial chemical contamination, from energy extraction (including from underground fracking and oil), agriculture, transportation and other sources.



### 5.3 Energy

Energy and environmental issues are closely linked. Energy is essential for our economy and our modern society to function, but its generation can have negative environmental consequences. Energy derived from burning fossil fuels is not sustainable and contributes to climate change. There is abundant evidence that less environmentally destructive and more sustainable sources of energy are available. We must choose to promote public energy generation and transmission and renewable sources of energy (as spelled out in CUPE's Electrical Energy Generation policy) that are less harmful to the environment and the climate, while recognizing that this shift will require a transition period.

A sustainable economy must be diverse and not heavily weighted on the direct export of energy derived from our natural resources.

CUPE recognizes that while energy is integral to economic and social prosperity, it must be produced and supplied in a way that is sustainable and does not compromise the environment.

- We will promote the principle that access to energy is a human right.
- We will work to keep energy generation and transmission public and promote public renewable energy, including advocating for bringing energy generation and transmission back into public ownership and control where it

has been privatized. Publicly-owned energy utilities have lower rates, ensuring more affordable access to energy than private electrical utilities, which typically have higher rates.

- We will support renewable energy that has a less harmful impact on the climate and the environment.
- We will encourage that the transition away from non-renewable forms of energy to newer, green energy solutions must be just and democratic.
- We will work to ensure that Aboriginal territorial rights are respected and that these are not compromised by energy projects, while



working to ensure clear processes are in place for sustainable and clean Aboriginal energy development for the benefit of Aboriginal communities and workers.

- We will oppose shale gas fracking, including exploration for the purpose of hydraulic fracking. Fracking for natural gas is not a viable solution to the climate crisis.
- We will promote energy conservation in all CUPE workplaces.

- We will reduce and minimize energy use through efficient CUPE operational practices.

#### *5.4 Waste and environmental toxins*

Waste must be reduced and natural resources need to be conserved. A society that over consumes depletes its resources and contaminates its air, water and soil with the waste that results. Waste can be reduced by consuming less, reducing excess packaging and diverting materials to recycling and composting streams that create good

green public sector jobs. Environmental toxins are harmful to human health and to the natural environment and must be eliminated. Large resource and industrial enterprises produce huge amounts of waste and environmental toxins. These sectors of our economy must be at the leading edge of waste reduction and cleaner industrial practices.

CUPE promotes efficient use of resources to decrease waste and the proliferation of environmental toxins, while ensuring that waste collection

and diversion work is kept in the public sector.

- We will promote waste reduction and encourage recycling, composting and all effective waste diversion methods.
- We will promote rigorous regulations and standards to eliminate toxic substances.
- We will promote substitution of toxic substances and products with more environmentally-benign alternatives.
- We will support municipal bans on toxic pesticides.
- We will support campaigns and programs to buy local and buy toxic-free.

- We will encourage the adoption of regulations to make polluters pay the full costs of their products via extended producer responsibility programs to fund publicly-provided recycling and waste systems.

### 5.5 Green jobs and greening the workplace

Good environmental choices are good for job growth and human development. There are opportunities—particularly in the public sector—to protect our environment while creating good, green jobs at the municipal level, in transportation, renewable energy, and other sectors. Our current jobs can be improved by reducing their environmental impact. CUPE members can push for changes to green their

workplaces and improve the environmental record of CUPE work. We have to change in two ways: promoting jobs that are better for the environment, and making existing jobs better for the environment.

CUPE calls for greener work practices in existing CUPE jobs and a just transition to good green jobs that reduce the environmental harm of all forms of work in the Canadian economy.

- We will promote all facets of greening the workplace, such as through green bargaining language, workplace environmental stewards and committees, workplace environmental policies, green audits and other programs. Whatever



workplace CUPE members work in, these steps, if taken, can have a significant positive environmental impact.

- We will encourage good green job growth while simultaneously making existing CUPE work greener.
- We will promote just transition strategies for workers and their communities that will help train and prepare workers for meaningful work in a new, green economy.
- We will promote all facets of green jobs, including jobs that directly help to clean up the environment (e.g., in recycling and reusing waste), jobs that protect

and restore ecosystems, jobs that spread information that is needed to improve our environmental record, and jobs in production in a new green economy, such as in new energy efficiency technology, energy efficiency building inspectors, manufacturing, and other types of work.

- We will promote public sector job growth via jobs necessary for climate change adaptation, such as jobs in urban design, urban landscaping and forestry, infrastructure resiliency, and other forms of work that will come on stream in a changing climate.





## *Conclusion: CUPE commits to green action*

**T**his policy looks outward from CUPE and describes a way forward for taking on today's critical environmental issues, such as climate change, which requires immediate action to cut greenhouse gases and adapt to an already-changing climate. The policy generates momentum to take action on environmental issues. CUPE will also apply an environmental lens to all we do.

CUPE will build on the strong steps that it has already taken (e.g., greener CUPE

office buildings, less travel, materials conservation, greener meetings and conventions) to further improve our environmental performance.



## *What can I do now?*

So, you've read the policy and now you wonder what's next. What can you do immediately? Here are a few ideas.

- Talk to your local president or executive to set up an environment committee in your workplace.** For tips on how to create such committee, have a look at this fact sheet: [cupe.ca/greening-workplace](http://cupe.ca/greening-workplace)
- Volunteer to be your local's contact on environmental issues.** Connect with CUPE National's network of environmental activists. Simply send an email to: [enviro@cupe.ca](mailto:enviro@cupe.ca)
- Assess the environmental record of your workplace with this simple tool.** [cupe.ca/forms/ecoaudit.php](http://cupe.ca/forms/ecoaudit.php)
- Organize an event or workshop to present and discuss this CUPE environment policy with your co-workers.** Start a conversation. Keep us informed: [enviro@cupe.ca](mailto:enviro@cupe.ca)
- Participate in local Earth Day events** (or other environmental days of action). Take photos and videos you can share.



## Endnotes

- 1 This policy was developed in response to Resolution #94 from 2011 CUPE National Convention. It was specifically formulated from a two-day meeting of approximately fifty members and staff, with input from a wide cross-section of our union, including representatives of the CUPE National Environment Committee, National Aboriginal Council, energy workers, the National Young Workers Committee and others.
- 2 *The Emissions Gap Report 2012*, United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), Nairobi, November 2012.
- 3 Peters, G.P., Andrew, R.M., Boden, T., Canadell, J.G., Ciais, P., Le Quere, C., Marland, G., Raupach, M.R., & Wilson, C.: "The challenge to keep global warming below 2°C" *Nature Climate Change*, London, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 2013.
- 4 Hayward, T. "Climate change and ethics" *Nature Climate Change*, London, Vol. 2, No. 12, December 2012.
- 5 Schaeffer, M., Hare, W., Rahmstorf, S. & Vermeer, M., "Long-term sea level rise implied by 1.5°C and 2°C warming levels" *Nature Climate Change*, London, Vol. 2, No. 12, December 2012.

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## *Appendix – A glossary of terms*

**Climate change** – the warming of the earth’s atmosphere and disruption of its climate systems caused by the build-up of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane and others) derived from human activity/behaviour.

**Decarbonize** – to move away from industrial, agricultural and all other economic practices and procedures that are heavily reliant on fossil fuels that are carbon-based and carbon intensive.

**Ecology/ecological** – the interactive and interdependent relationship of living things to one another and their environment.

**Extended producer responsibility** – an environmental waste strategy that aims to minimize the environmental cost of products and

production by making the producer more responsible for their products, while ensuring waste disposal and recycling are maintained as public services.

**Green economy** – a new and vibrant economy comprised of activity and jobs that are better for the environment where jobs in the green economy are good, decent, equitable and meaningful.

**Green job** – any of a wide range of work that is better for the environment where the jobs are good, decent, equitable and meaningful.

**Greening the workplace** – a wide range of actions that can be taken at work to improve the environmental efficiency and performance of workplace practices and procedures.

**Just transition** – training, education and the creation of job placement opportunities for workers and their communities that might lose work and/or have jobs become obsolete due to environmental reasons.

**Low carbon economy/society** – a society and economy that is much less dependent on fossil fuels and instead derives energy to operate its economy/society from more environmentally-benign renewable energy sources.

**Sustainable/sustainability** – practices and procedures that operate within the limits of the earth’s resources based on an appreciation of ecology that will ensure these practices and procedures endure and are equitable.



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