

9-6-2024 Introductory Remarks to Community Conversation on Jobs and the Environment. Marianne Hill

Welcome to this Community Conversation - co-sponsored by Sierra Club Maine, the Bureau of Labor Education, and the Maine Labor Climate Council. So glad you can be with us. This event is being recorded in hopes that our conversation today goes viral!

Our topic is one that can get the adrenaline going - what is needed for Maine - its people, its wildlife and all its beautiful places - to thrive as we tackle climate change. This conversation aims to bring clarity and enthusiasm to this work. We hope to create stronger bonds among us as we figure out together how to make the future we envision a reality.

[This poem by Penthea Burns, a Wabanaki poet here in Maine, talks about our challenge.]

For much of my life
I underestimated robins
Then I learned their song.
...the robin knows about sustenance
Living, Pausing to sing.
Would the powers that made a robin...Grant dominance To grabbing hands
Seeking profit and more profit.
[by blowing off mountaintops; poisoning honeybees; leaving animals to die]
I am certain that the powers of the universe
Intended to grant us Not dominion
But responsibility, Creation, love, and regard for
The fish of the sea, birds of the heavens
Livestock, every creeping thing
And all the earth.

As this poem notes, it is sadly true that we humans have not been kind to the earth in our efforts to make better lives for ourselves. We have created deserts, wiped out species, polluted our rivers and oceans, and warmed our atmosphere to the point where we are faced with rising sea levels and disasters that threaten our future. It is not inevitable, though, that oceans will flood coastal cities and fires consume our forests. But scientists warn that we don't have much time left to prevent such catastrophes.

The need to change how we live, then, is urgent. But the transition to new values and green technologies will not be easy. It will be a disruptive, seismic shift. Think about the huge changes that came as we went from horse and buggy to cars and planes.

The switch to green, clean technologies will inflict hardship - unnecessary hardship. Sadly, our democracy has failed so many of us in so many ways that it seems unlikely that governments

will devote adequate funding to making whole those deeply hurt during the transition. Many have already lost faith in today's democracy; some even believe the answer lies in authoritarian leadership.

We understand this mistrust of our current system. About 40% of Mainers are only scraping by. Paying for health care and housing is a challenge; and college is typically out of reach. They cannot afford any drop in their standard of living. They do not receive bailouts when they are in crisis, unlike our big banks.

But ending climate change requires broad support, with everyone in our communities on board. Investing in people, then, is as important to ending climate change as investments in new technologies and a shift to biodegradable chemicals and materials. This means a huge shift in our political priorities. We need to give everyone a real voice as policies are set - greater accountability and transparency in government decision-making can restore trust - and restore our democracy.

Our country can afford to provide a just transition. But our wealth must be distributed more fairly. Unions are doing their part - advocating for justice at the workplace. Many nonprofits are helping those experiencing tough times. But government programs are far from adequate. Health care, child care, housing, higher education all need improvement. The green transition in addition demands subsidies for insulating homes, for heat pumps and electric vehicles; more funds for worker training, unemployment benefits, and much more. Perhaps most importantly, our tax system should be reformed so that corporations and the super-rich pay their fair share of these expenses.

We know what needs to be done to save our planet. The protection and restoration of our ecosystems is the most effective and efficient way to stop climate change. We must reach zero net greenhouse gas emissions well before 2050. Besides clean energy, we must reduce the GHG in the atmosphere. This requires restorative care of our oceans and lands - with our help, they absorb enough GHG to make our atmosphere safe again (see: regenerate.org).

Both labor and environmentalists have been working to ensure that green jobs pay a living wage and that disadvantaged workers have access to the childcare and transportation they need to participate in training programs. There are many other areas where collaboration can help in the fight against climate change - from advocating for zero-interest loans for home insulation to tax reforms that increase funding for needed programs.

Labor and environmentalists have often collaborated in the past - we need to build on that history. Maine and the nation depend on citizens who organize for what is right.

The coming elections make clear the extent of the challenge. We have a presidential candidate whose agenda does not even acknowledge the value of a healthy planet.

Critical to building the future we envision is making our voices heard! I'm excited about the potential outcomes of today's important conversation!!

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NOTES FROM PREVIOUS ARTICLES:

The strength and unity of a coalition, in fact, depend more on the values each organization embodies, than on the values it may profess. Trust and commitment, vital to long-term cooperation, must be consciously sought by all member organizations. Trust is built through actual practices of members. Actions that show commitment to shared values and the shared agenda cement the relationships that are the foundation of coalitions.

Know that connection and cooperation among progressive organizations is sorely needed if we are to move towards deeper democracy, regenerative economies and more caring societies. We need coalitions that can bring clarity and courage to the struggle to create a post-capitalist society in which all can thrive.

And also engagement with currently existing parties is indispensable in the articulation of (national) political identities. People locate themselves politically in reaction to those parties. Without collective confrontation of dominant parties, resistance to those parties will be fragmented and less effective. That is, vertical engagement, as well as horizontal organizing efforts, is critical to transformative change (see Mouffe 2018).

The sorry consequences of inequality are seen in health care, housing, workers and the environment].

[The financial crisis took retirement savings and often homes - no bailouts for those holding mortgages or retirement accounts - only for banks and corporations. During the Covid crisis, people relied on local food banks - not government programs - for food.]

Coalitions bring together a variety of organizations. Coalitions impact the self-identities, institutions, and knowledge creation of each member organization. A coalition, then, can be understood as a social innovation that creates new relationships. Skill in building relationships, then, is absolutely critical to a coalition's success. This aspect of social change has not been adequately incorporated into economic analyses of the processes leading to a transformed society.

Preventing and addressing divisions is a major challenge coalitions face. One important and hopeful observation countering the all-too-frequent negativity regarding the possibility of unity is the fact that differences in perspectives are not intractable. Understandings continually evolve as a result of both shared experiences and of discussions and debates that shape opinions.

Debate and compromise are in fact basic to the creation of the shared political identity needed to unite and solidify coalitions. Mutual respect and shared goals may be just the starting point in working together. The actions of each organization are also critical.

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