Just two weeks before superstorm Sandy inflicted devastating damage to the Caribbean and northeastern United States, a three-day global trade union roundtable titled “Energy Emergency, Energy Transition” took place in New York City on October 10-12, 2012, at the headquarters of the New York City District Council of Carpenters.

Cornell Global Labor Institute (GLI) and the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung organized the roundtable.

The meeting was called to discuss trade union responses to the unimpeded rise in the use of fossil fuels that is leading to ‘carbon lock in’ and out-of-control greenhouse gas emissions on a global scale; the growing political influence of oil, coal and gas companies; and the inadequacy of present market-based approaches to energy transition.

**Discussion Paper**

Cornell GLI produced a discussion document for the roundtable titled *Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Trade Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy*. The English version of the document has since been revised. A Spanish version of the revised document will be available on December 4, 2012.
The most recent version of the document is available (in English and Spanish) at:

http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/required-reading-roundtable-discussion-document/

The document outlines the extent of the energy emergency, the problems related to the current policy framework, and the need for unions and their allies to champion bold and effective solutions within a framework of energy democracy.

Outcomes of the Roundtable

The roundtable concluded with participants identifying several “areas of agreement” that emerged from the three-day discussion as well as an “assessment of needs” for further developing a “Trade Unions for Energy Democracy” Initiative. A summary of the Areas of Agreement and Assessment of Needs discussion appears on pages 7-9 of this report, and can also be viewed here:


The Areas of Agreement included full recognition of the fact that we face an ‘energy emergency.’ Present trends in the energy sector (including the rise of ‘extreme energy’ like tar oil, shale gas, and deep water drilling) will lead to a catastrophic six degrees Celsius of global warming accompanied by persistent energy poverty, rising public health problems and fatalities from pollution, and a range of political and economic attacks on workers both in the traditional energy sector and beyond, including land grabs and displacements. Roundtable participants agreed that ‘business as usual’ is therefore not an option.

Participants also acknowledged that the energy transition the world needs is not happening, and market-based approaches aimed at developing renewable and low carbon sources of energy are inadequate at best. Renewable energy is not growing fast enough to appreciably slow down the rise in fossil fuel use. The growth in renewable energy merely supplements the use of fossil fuels, which continue to increase at an alarming rate. More than 50 percent of new energy demand is being met by coal.¹ Fossil fuels are still set to meet more than three-fourths of total energy needs in 2035 assuming current policies are unchanged.² ‘Modern renewables’ like wind and solar comprise just 4.2 percent of global energy consumption and only 0.3 percent of total energy supply.³

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The current regulatory and market–based approaches to promote renewable energy and energy conservation are totally inadequate, as are measures to develop other low carbon technologies like carbon capture and storage and nuclear power. According to the International Energy Agency, if all government commitments to clean energy were met, and all proposed plans were actually implemented, by 2035 renewable energy will still stand at just 16 percent of all energy consumed globally.4

It was accepted that unions and their allies must therefore embark on a sustained struggle for democratic control over energy resources and energy options. The need for solidarity across the global labor movement and the need to build stronger alliances with social movements who share this and similar goals was also strongly emphasized.

In the Assessment of Needs participants identified the need to build and sustain a global trade union community for energy democracy. This community would need to find ways to stay connected, share information, discuss strategy, build solidarity, and promote effective action. The need for both leadership and membership education was also expressed, as well as carefully planned and inclusive meetings to further build and strengthen this community.

**Participants:**

Unions from 18 countries attended the roundtable, many of them from the Global South.

A full list of participants can be seen here: [http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/program/participants/](http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/program/participants/)

Unions represented:

- **Africa:** National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa; National Union of Mineworkers (South Africa); Nigeria Labor Congress; Nigeria Union of Electrical Employees

- **Americas:** AFL-CIO (Department of International Affairs); Canadian Union of Public Employees; Confédération des syndicats nationaux/Quebec (CSN); Canadian Labour Congress; Oilfield Workers Trade Union (Trinidad and Tobago); Power Workers Union (Canada), National Union of Aviation Workers (Brazil); Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Brazil); Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura (Brazil); Federação Nacional dos Urbanitários (Brazil); Electrical Workers (Mexico); National Agro-Food Union of Colombia, Central de los Trabajadores de la Argentina, (CTA); New

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York District Council of Carpenters; National Nurses United (US); Trade Union Confederation of the Americas; Amalgamated Transit Union (US); International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (US); Service Employees International Union (US); National Education Association (US); American Federation of Teachers (US)

- **Asia:** General Confederation of Labour (Vietnam); New Trade Union Initiative (India); Alliance for Progressive Labour (Philippines)

- **Australia:** Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.

- **Europe:** Union of Municipal and General Employees (Norway); Coalminers’ Trade Union in Poland (ZZG); La Federazione della Funzione Pubblica, General Confederation of Labour (Italy); Russian Oil, Gas and Construction Workers’ Union

- **Global Union Federations:** IndustriALL Global Union; International Transport Workers Federation; International Union of Food Workers; Public Services international

**Constituency Groups and Allies:**

International Nuclear Workers Union Network; Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU); Rosa Luxemburg Foundation; Kolagbodi Memorial Foundation (Nigeria); Local Clean Energy Alliance (US); Third World Network and International Forum on Globalization; Green Institute Foundation (Poland); National Institute of Labor Protection (Vietnam); Workforce Development Institute (US); J. S. Murphy Center for Labor Education (US); University of Tel Aviv (Israel); Labor Network for Sustainability (US); Ton Duc Thang Trade Union University (Vietnam); Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at Empire State College (US); Municipal Services Project (Canada); Polaris Institute and the Green Economy Network (CANADA)

**Guests:**

Greetings were extended by: Vincent Alvarez, President, New York City Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO; Bruce Raynor, Sidney Hillman Foundation; Marc Bayard, Worker Institute at Cornell.

Leading climate and energy scientists Dr. James Hansen from NASA’s Goddard Institute and Robert Howarth from Cornell University, also Wenonah Hauter from Food and Water Watch and James Gustav Speth from the Vermont Law School, joined the discussion.
Key Issues Addressed

The 3-day roundtable was broken down into 9 sessions, summarized below:

Session 1: Collision Course: Carbon Lock-In and the Need for Action.

The session began with a 30-minute presentation by Sean Sweeney and Lara Skinner of Cornell GLI on the ‘energy emergency.’ The powerpoint is available at:

http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/conference-presentations/

Directly following the presentation, the question was posed: How should unions respond, both individually and collectively, to what is happening in the energy sector?

This session was facilitated by Brian Kohler, IndustriALL Global Union.

Contributors to the debate: David Shier, President, Canadian Nuclear Workers’ Council (CNWC) and Power Workers Union, Canada; Helen Diatile, Educational National Chairperson, National Union of Mine Workers, South Africa; Lev Mironov, President, Russian Oil, Gas and Construction Workers’ Union (ROGWU); Andre Mrost (ROGWU); David Abdulah, Secretary General, Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU), Trinidad and Tobago.

Session 2: The Climate Crisis and the Need for an Energy Transition

Guest Speaker, Dr. James Hansen, Director, NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies. Hansen described what is happening in the world’s climate system and why the situation amounts to a planetary emergency.

Dr. Hansen’s presentation can be seen here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbmghon5TY

Cedric Gina, President, National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), responded to Dr. Hansen’s comments.

Session 3: “Fracking the Planet? The Global Shale Gas Boom and What it Means for Workers and the Environment

Participants heard from Robert Howarth, Professor of Ecology and Environmental Biology, Cornell University, and Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director, Food and Water Watch, on the climate-related and other environmental, social and employment impacts of hydraulic fracturing or “fracking.”
Unedited video footage can be seen here:

http://youtu.be/T3lb5O-igds

http://youtu.be/rOxy8yIdrZ4

**Session 4:** Energy Transition, “Green Economy” and the New Discourse

This session was led and facilitated by Maite Llanos, Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), and Charles Fleury, Canadian Union of Public Employees.

The session began with a presentation by Adolfo Aguirre Ortman, Secretary of International Affairs, Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), titled: *After Rio+20, Where Now? Discussion on Union Perspectives and Strategy*

A written summary of his comments (in Spanish) can be found here (7th item on the list):

http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/conference-presentations/

Presentation respondents: Karl Cloete, Deputy General Secretary, National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, (NUMSA); Peter Colley, National Research Director at Construction, Forestry, Mining & Energy Union (CFMEU), Australia; Owei Lakemfa, General Secretary, Nigeria Labour Congress.

**Session 5:** Energy for What? Union Perspectives on Resource Struggles, Equity and Development

This session tackled union and policy perspectives on national sovereignty, development priorities, ‘destructive extraction,’ and energy poverty.

Contributors: Ashim Roy, General Secretary, New Trade Union Initiative, NTUI; Josua Mata, Alliance for Progressive Labour, Philippines; Dale Jiajun Wen, Third World Network and International Forum on Globalization; Jose Humberto Montes de Oca Luna, Secretary of the Exterior, Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME); Antonio Lucas, Secretary for Rural Workers, Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura, (CONTAG), Brazil.

**Session 6:** Special Meeting on Transport and Energy

Alana Dave, Education Officer for the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), facilitated a roundtable discussion on the ITF’s approach to tackling emissions from transport with John Samuelsen, President of the Transport Workers Union
Local 100 NYC, Marcelo Schmidt, General Secretary of the National Union of Airline Workers Brazil, Asbjorn Wahl, Co-Chair of the ITF Climate Change Working Group/Norwegian Municipal Workers' Union and Sandra van Niekirk, Public Services International Research Unit.

**Session 7: Resist and Reclaim – The Global Effort to Fight Privatization and Promote Economic Democracy**

Contributions from Artur Henrique da Silva Santos, President (outgoing), Central Unica dos Trabalhardores (CUT), Brazil; Rosa Pavanelli, President, La Federazione della Funzione Pubblica, General Confederation of Labor (CGIL), Italy; DeAnn McEwen, Vice President, National Nurses United, US.

**Session 8: The Trade Union Case for Democratic Ownership of Energy**

Presentation by David Hall, Director, Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU), UK, titled, “The Social, Environmental and Trade Union Case for Public and Democratic Ownership of Energy.” The powerpoint can be viewed here:

http://energyemergencyenergytransition.org/conference-presentations/

Contributors: David Boys, Utilities Officer, Public Services International; Joseph Ajaero, General Secretary, Nigeria Union of Electricity Employees; Nathalie Guay, Confédération des syndicats nationaux/Quebec (CSN); Dinga Sikwebu, Director of Education, National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), South Africa; Wilian Vagner Moreira, Federação Nacional dos Urbanitários (FNU/CUT), Brazil.

**Session 9: Discussion on Cornell GLI Discussion Document “Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: The Trade Union Struggle for Energy Democracy” and "Areas of Agreement”**

The session was led by the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF). Facilitators: Alana Dave (ITF) and Asbjorn Wahl (Union of Municipal and General Employees, Norway, ITF Climate Working Group).

**Areas of Agreement**

Roundtable participants identified several areas of agreement and also established an assessment of needs for future work.

1. There is an emerging global trade union community that recognizes we face an energy emergency that threatens workers, communities, the environment and ultimately, the very existence of human civilization. The rising use of fossil fuels is leading to ‘carbon lock-in’ and risks a catastrophic six degrees Celsius of global warming. Rising fossil fuel
use is also increasing the political power of fossil fuel corporations and seriously undermines democratic political decision-making.

2. Fossil fuel companies and many governments are obstructing any serious effort to address the energy emergency and develop sustainable industrial policy and energy decisions that serve the public interest. Multilateral efforts to transition to a truly sustainable economy have been rendered ineffective by large corporations. These efforts cannot be expected to produce the energy transition the world and its people desperately need.

3. Bold approaches to energy transition are needed. These approaches will require a struggle for democratic control over all energy resources and energy options – including fossil fuels, nuclear power and renewable energy. Market-based policies are not driving the energy transition that is demanded by science and required by people. Energy democracy is a core component of a truly sustainable economy, and can allow for adequate and effective ‘just transition’ policies and programs that protect workers and communities.

4. Solidarity across the trade union movement is crucial in order to generate action, as are efforts to organize workers throughout the energy economy. As unions develop and advance an energy democracy agenda, it is important to consult unions that represent workers in the energy sector on issues that will potentially affect their sectors. We must also identify partners and build alliances to fight climate change and address the energy emergency. In particular, the relationship with other social movements must be developed and strengthened, strategically and programmatically, in order to challenge the dominant pro-business approach to sustainable development that seeks to put a price on nature and to further commodify the commons.

Assessment of Needs

1. Developing a Global Trade Union Community for Energy Democracy. There is a need for a distinct trade union community that can stay connected and deepen its capacity to develop and advance an agenda that addresses the energy emergency, protects people and nature, builds trade union and worker power. This includes staying abreast of key developments and struggles around energy, sharing experiences and exchanging information, and developing policy options and other strategies to advance energy democracy. This will not happen automatically.

2. Commitment to Education. There is a need for sustained leadership and membership level and activist education on energy, climate change and sustainability across sectors. Together we should aim at collecting and providing materials based on the various successful
educational efforts unions have already undertaken.

3. **Meetings and Discussions.** We should aim to have periodic meetings to further build and strengthen a trade union community to address the energy emergency, and to promote a democratic, equitable approach to energy transition. To be successful these meetings must be inclusive in every respect. They must be carefully planned, well informed, and open to inputs from unions representing different sectors and perspectives.

**Where Now? Launching a Trade Unions for Energy Democracy Initiative**

There was consensus among the roundtable participants that the October meeting was just one step towards developing a global trade union community for Energy Democracy.

Cornell GLI intends to work with a number of unions and other partners over the next year to launch a *Trade Unions for Energy Democracy Initiative*. This will involve Cornell GLI coordinating and convening a variety of meetings and discussions throughout 2013 and beyond that will help build and strengthen the trade union community for Energy Democracy. The goal of these meetings and discussions is to help unions address the energy emergency and promote a democratic, equitable approach to energy transition.