

November 25, 2020

The Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, PC, MP
Minister of Environment and Climate Change
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Via email



Dear Minister:

I am writing to you on behalf of the National Union of Public and General Employees' (NUPGE) more than 390,000 members regarding Bill C-12, the Canadian Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act.

NUPGE members know first-hand the impacts of climate change, both in their working lives and as community members. Our members are workers on the front lines providing health care to those affected by pollution, extreme weather, and climate-related disasters. They are fighting the increasingly frequent and severe wildfires. They are the workers providing care and social services to those vulnerable communities affected disproportionately by climate change.

Climate change is already here, and scientists have been unequivocal: time is running out to take action to avoid the worst-case scenario. As you know, Canada has never met any of its past climate targets. We—and the generations to come—simply can't afford to let this happen again.

We were pleased to see your government commit to increasing the level of ambition of Canada's climate targets under the Paris Agreement, and to legislating those commitments. Therefore, the new Canadian Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act introduced on November 19 is a welcome development. It signals your government's commitment to action, not simply rhetoric. But I echo the mixed response from environmental advocates and experts.

It is encouraging to see that the new legislation would require the current and future governments to set binding climate targets to get Canada to its commitment of net-zero greenhouse emissions by 2050. It is also positive that the federal government would be required to establish 5-year interim emissions-reduction targets and to consult with an expert advisory board.

However, we remain concerned about a number of elements. Primarily, as environmental advocates have pointed out, the lack of clear penalties or other enforcement raises questions about how effective the legislation will be. Absent are clear consequences should the government fail to reach its targets.



It is also disappointing that the legislation does not require an emissions target until 2030. This falls short of the Prime Minister's promise during the 2019 election to create legally binding targets every 5 years.

Furthermore, I would like to take this opportunity to raise related concerns. In making these commitments to lower emissions, it is imperative to consider and mitigate the impact on workers and communities.

As I wrote to you on November 26, 2019, NUPGE believes firmly that the transition to a more sustainable future must be a just and equitable one. In other words, the approach to decarbonization must not cast aside the workers in affected industries, but must instead involve them and their labour representatives in decision-making and policy-making processes to ensure the transition is fair and equitable for workers and their communities.

In my November 2019 letter, I urged your government to invest resources in retraining, social security and income supports, workforce development, and community supports to foster a Just Transition. This will require support from robust and well-funded public and social services. I also urged you to enact federal legislation that will support the development of green energy in Canada, delivered through the public sector, and to build on the work of the Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities.

In developing Just Transition policies and program, those who are most impacted by the transition must be at the table. This means the energy and resource workers, as well as those in the surrounding communities, such as workers in social services, hospitality, and food services. It also means the health care workers, first responders, and care workers that are on the front lines of climate change impacts. All of these workers and communities must see the resources, protections, and support they need to deal with climate impacts and to get through the transition. These workers and their representatives are also well positioned to inform solutions for climate change adaptation and mitigation.

We were pleased to see your government's commitment to implement a Just Transition Act. But almost one year later, we have seen no discernible movement forward. The transition to a more sustainable future is already underway. We have no more time to waste in ensuring the workers on the front lines have the resources, protections, and path forward they need.

We also know that Indigenous communities, Black communities, and communities of colour are disproportionately impacted by climate change and environmental degradation. Your government's commitment to tackling systemic racism must include fighting environmental racism. These communities must be at the decision-making tables and be empowered to lead the way on solutions. There is a great deal to learn from Indigenous communities, in particular, when it comes to sustainability.

NUPGE has also written on the gendered impacts of environmental and climate change and on the disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities. It is crucial to foreground the voices of those disproportionately impacted. In short, your government's commitments to advancing equality must not be viewed or treated as separate from its environmental and climate policy.

Evidently, the issue of climate change is a complex one, and warrants equally complex, structural responses. Like the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change exposes and exacerbates existing structural issues and inequities in our society.

The convergence of the COVID-19 crisis, the economic crisis, and the climate crisis represents a potential turning point for Canada. Amidst the devastation, there is an opportunity—and a responsibility—to build a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. We have no choice but to get out of these intersecting crises, but Canadians do have a choice about which path we take.

NUPGE joined hundreds of civil society organizations from across Canada in endorsing the [Principles for a Just Recovery](#). The principles encompass NUPGE's long-standing commitments to equity and justice, solidarity, health and safety, strong public services, workers' rights, and Indigenous rights and sovereignty. I urge your government to act so that the recovery from the COVID-19 and climate crises, and the related economic crisis, is informed by these principles.

The pandemic has laid bare the gaps and inequities in our society, but it has also shown us what is possible when faced with a crisis, and when political and public will are present. I implore you to make good on your government's commitment to "build back better."

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with your office to further discuss the concerns, experiences, and recommendations of NUPGE members on these issues.

Sincerely,



Larry Brown
President

cc: Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer
National Executive Board
Dan Albas, Critic for Environment and Climate Change, Conservative Party
Laurel Collins, Critic for Environment and Climate Change, New Democratic Party
Monique Pauzé, Critic for Environment and Climate Change, Bloc Québécois
Annemie Paul, Leader of the Green Party