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Climate rally brings together ‘uneasy coalition’ of Naomi Klein and union boss Jerry Dias

JOSEPH BREAN | May 21, 2015 7:10 PM ET

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As a study in contrasts, Thursday’s climate change rally in Toronto’s financial district had much to offer.

Sweet-grass smoke mixed with the acrid downtown smell of hot tar and exhaust. Finance types on coffee breaks strolled past a woman failing to sell copies of the Socialist Worker. Speaker after speaker said this land belongs to First Nations — Mississaugas of the New Credit, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee — but the private security guards keeping watch made clear this corner of King and Bay streets is also TD territory.

But no contrast was greater than that between the two main speakers: Naomi Klein, lion of the left, socialist slayer of brands, champion of the economically oppressed; and Jerry Dias, head of Canada’s largest private-sector union Unifor and the voice of hundreds of thousands who work in the energy sector, oilsands and automobile production.

This odd couple of a gel-haired union heavyweight and an anti-capitalist oracle in sensible shoes is no accident. It is the new future for climate activism. But it is uncertain and untested. Even Klein called it an “uneasy coalition.”

“We have key differences, but what unites us is greater than that, and that’s why we’re coming together,” she said. “What you’re seeing are the first steps for the new kind of climate movement.”

Unifor’s presence made the rally, in support of a larger protest this summer, a “historic moment,” she said, and “absolutely unprecedented anywhere in the world. There’s trade union presence in the climate movement, but not from the sector that represents the extractive industry as powerfully as Unifor does. It’s very bold.”





Even the effort to strike a positive tone is a shift, Klein said, from past doomsaying and demands for closure of the oilsands toward a more optimistic vision of a possible future economy, based on wind, solar and geothermal energy.

"I think the time is now," she said.

The problem, though, is that for climate activists, the time has been now for well over a decade.

Once it was all Hollywood and Al Gore at the Oscars, but that eventually fizzled. Now, a new model is being championed, with less glitz and more grit.

"What happened is there was a huge amount of public concern, public attention, and then the financial crisis hit. It's very simple," Klein said in an interview. Climate change simply dropped off the political agenda.



A key problem was that many of the climate change policies proposed "didn't put justice at the centre." Many would have increased

costs for regular consumers, and there was not enough emphasis on the positive opportunities for job creation.

The solutions proposed in the “*Inconvenient Truth* moment” also seemed “notional,” Klein said. “It wasn’t like you could point to a place that was doing it.”

Now there are strong solar economies, in Germany, for example. In Canada, she said Alberta is in the best position to lead, with optimal conditions for geothermal, solar and wind, and also many newly unemployed workers because of the drop in oil prices.

This opportunity will be a “real test” for the province’s new New Democratic Party government.

“I think it’s less about picking a fight with the oil and gas industry, more about the fact that they’ve got a jobs crisis now. They’ve got all of this unused potential, and they’re tired of having a black eye internationally. There’s a huge potential for leadership.”



The purpose of the rally was to promote the March for Jobs, Justice and the Climate, which will happen in Toronto July 5 to coincide with Pan American Economic Summit meetings on climate and an expected statement on climate from Pope Francis.

The audience was equal in number to the activists — about 30 people in each. They got a few honks, but none of the passing suits seemed to stop or pay much attention.

There was, of course, a hint of class warfare in the frequent allusions to the people in the glass towers — this was the main reason for holding the rally on a busy corner in the heart of the financial district.

It was also difficult to square Klein’s economic optimism with the view of Syed Hussan, representing the No One Is Illegal activist network, who said the climate movement “is about turning away from capitalism.”

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“The real people of this city are in other parts,” he said. “This is the top of the mountain. This is where the mining companies make the decisions to impoverish our people. This is where banks make the decisions, where money changes hands faster than the blink of an eye while we are barely surviving, and every attempt at survival is met with repression.”

But Dias echoed Klein’s economic optimism, a new and untested theme for climate activists, if not union bosses.

“We need a commitment to climate and it doesn’t have to come at the expense of jobs,” he said.

