The New York City subway system moves over 5.3 million people per day across 660 miles of tracks beneath the city. It links to four other commuter rail systems, bringing an additional one million people into the city from the suburbs and smaller regional cities such as Stamford, Connecticut; White Plains, New York; and Newark, New Jersey, each day. The system connects workers to jobs, consumers to goods and services, and students to schools, and it underpins the over $4.6 billion dollars of economic activity in the city each day. It also accounts for more than half of the seventy thousand jobs in the Metropolitan Transit Authority, which runs New York’s public transit system. That is why, on the evening of Sunday, October 28, 2012, New York’s decision to suspend all subway service in anticipation of Superstorm Sandy was not taken lightly. This decision proved wise because the storm arrived with a vengeance on October 29, rendering the subway system nonoperational until Thursday, November 1.

Beyond paralyzing the subway, the storm caused unprecedented destruction throughout the Northeast as 80 mph winds and record storm surges wreaked havoc across the East Coast, flooding roads, destroying homes, leaving more than eight million without power across seventeen states, and causing fires like the one that burned down the community of Breezy Point in Queens. Over one hundred deaths were attributed to the storm. As with previous extreme storms such as Hurricane Katrina, which hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, or later storms like Hurricane Maria, which ravaged Puerto Rico in 2017, it was the working
class and poor—the frontline communities—who were hit first and worst. Nine years later, New York and New Jersey were devastated again by Hurricane Ida while still continuing to shore up transit infrastructure ruined by Sandy, with repairs on some lines not even forecast to begin until 2022. The storm’s damage to the New York City subway alone was estimated to cost $5 billion to repair. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) places the total cost of the storm at $70.2 billion—possibly the costliest to ever hit the region (National Centers for Environmental Information, n.d.). The storm was the most devastating event to hit New York City since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Steve Downs, a member and local leader of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, described to me how more than 1,500 members of his union had worked around the clock after the storm to get service back up and running in just a few days, exceeding even the most optimistic predictions. “Transit workers always play a special part in the functioning of the city,” he said, “but they really stepped up and did extra during this time; in less than optimal conditions, with no shelters, in the elements, working double overtime, including people who had their own personal concerns, who had lost their homes and had uncertainty of where their family was going to be at night”.

Some workers stayed on the job for three or four straight days, pumping out over fifty miles of flooded tunnels, reconnecting electricity, checking signals, and operating a continuous cycle of shuttle buses across the major bridges into and out of Manhattan to keep the city moving while the nine flooded tunnels connecting the island to the mainland were cleaned out and repaired. “In 108 years [of operation],” stated Joe Lhota, chairman of the Metropolitan Transit Authority, “our employees have never faced a challenge like the one that confronts us now [in the wake of the storm].”

At their union’s national convention on September 23, 2013—nearly a year after the storm—many transportation workers shared their stories of loss, of bravery by fellow members who had saved their lives, and of the union’s tremendous relief efforts, which brought donations in from other locals around the country to help the New York and New Jersey members after the storm. More than one thousand of the union’s members lived in the storm-ravaged Coney Island area of Brooklyn. Many had their homes wiped out by the storm, and others had over eight feet of water in their homes in the days following the storm. They had lost electricity, they had lost their winter clothes just before the season was about to change, and many had lost everything they owned. “Just to drive down these streets and see their homes being emptied out and all the debris and the broken water lines and how they were affected,” one member recounted in a video played at the convention. “It was like, you know, I’m
not old enough to say I lived through the Great Depression, but I think I’ve seen it. These people are standing in line for a daily meal.”

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) also coordinated relief efforts after the storm, including organizing volunteer efforts by their members who visited the hardest-hit communities to provide care. They opened up a deployment site that operated out of the organization’s RV on Staten Island, sending teams of registered nurses door-to-door to determine people’s needs and provide much-needed care to many residents affected by the storm. As health professionals, the nurses dealt directly with the people affected by the health consequences of climate change. At a rally, Nella Pineda-Marcon, chair of the union’s Committee on Climate and Environmental Justice, stated, “We nurses are all too familiar with the fact that climate change wreaks havoc on our weather, and extreme weather events create public health emergencies” (NYSNA 2018).

Bruce Hamilton, a leader in the ATU with members in New Jersey, said living through Sandy had opened the eyes of their membership and some of their local leaders. The highly diverse memberships of the New York and New Jersey transportation unions had many members whose neighborhoods were among the worst hit by the storm but who also had histories of racial, economic, and environmental injustices—all issues the members had brought into their union work. Sandy dramatically revealed that the issue of climate change was just another injustice their unions should confront and that it was, in fact, inextricably connected with the issues of economic and social justice the union was already confronting daily. Many locals formed union climate justice committees. At the national level, the ATU went so far as to adopt a resolution titled “Opposing Fossil Fuel Dependency.” Bruce said that “Sandy made it clear that climate change was real and that it was a worker issue, a union issue.”

Similarly, Henry Garrido, executive director of American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37 in New York City, said at a rally, “Our workers were at the forefront manning shelters, evacuating people, preparing hospital beds, and rescuing people every day” during and after Sandy. “Labor,” he went on, “must stand for more than working conditions. We must stand for more than contracts. We must stand for environmental justice—otherwise, we will become irrelevant.” The issue of climate change, he stated, is “the biggest threat to our humanity. We can no longer afford to put our heads in the sand” (Brecher 2015).

However, not all unions were singing “Kumbaya” about climate justice. In the lead-up to Sandy and the two years following the storm, the nation’s major construction unions, known as the building trades, were fighting fiercely against environmentalists, liberal politicians, and several unions, including
the TWU, over the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline. For the construction unions, the pipeline project represented a huge employment opportunity for their members, who were still facing high levels of unemployment in the wake of the Great Recession. For environmentalists, Indigenous people, climate justice advocates, and several other unions, it represented a tremendous step in the wrong direction in the battle against climate change. LIUNA’s Terry O’Sullivan stated, “It’s repulsive, it’s disgusting, and we’re not going to stand idly by. . . . Unions and environmental groups that have no equity in the work have kicked our members in the teeth. And anger is an understatement as to how we feel about it. We’re not sitting at the same table as people that destroy our members’ lives.” He went so far as to propose using his union’s political influence to block funding for public transportation projects and promised to oppose any future bailouts of the auto industry, indicating resentment for the United Auto Workers (UAW), which had signed a statement supporting President Obama’s decision to block the pipeline project.

Neither were leaders of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) jumping up to support a transition to renewable energy. The long-term decline in coal jobs, caused overwhelmingly by automation and market forces such as the rise of cheaper natural gas as an alternative fuel source, left many coal communities economically devastated. The workers and their unions, however, blamed the devastation not on the forces of capitalism but rather on the government—in particular, the Environmental Protection Agency and its pollution and emission regulations. This anger led in part to the success of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in traditionally Democratic areas of Appalachia, where he held “Trump Digs Coal” rallies and promised to undo environmental regulations and bring coal jobs back.

However, for Steve and tens of thousands of other workers who were victims of Sandy and other climate catastrophes in recent years, the question remained: “But what about the devastation we have experienced as a result of burning too many fossil fuels?” Not just the direct impact of any particular storm “but the increasing health problems for the kids, the asthma and allergies, the dangerous heat days on the job, and the risk of more extreme storms [from the long-term changes being made to the climate].” All those problems disproportionately impact workers from historically marginalized communities that have been dealing with environmental injustices for decades and are now confronted with climate injustice as well.

Environmental justice activists who have been organizing for decades to address the legacies of industrial pollution and environmental racism were quick to connect the dots between Sandy and climate injustice. For example, UPROSE, a community organization in Brooklyn, convened and hosted a com-
community meeting in Sunset Park on December 19, 2012, to listen to and engage with community members about their experiences during and after the storm. Sharing stories of neighbors helping neighbors and describing some of the unexpected problems and challenges families encountered, meeting participants declared, “We are the First Responders!” This meeting led to the creation of the Climate Justice Center, which has been working to develop community strategies to address the problems identified and make the community more sustainable and resilient for residents, workers, and businesses in the face of increasingly severe and more frequent extreme weather that not only harms human health and well-being but also has significant economic implications.

In a piece titled “Hurricane Sandy by the Numbers,” Time magazine reported that the estimated dollar value of the lost business activity as a result of Sandy was $25 billion (Webley 2012). Over fifty-seven thousand utility workers came from thirty states and Canada to New York to assist in restoring power to the city. Sandy was so devastating that it forced the closing of the New York Stock Exchange for two days, the first time it had been closed for two consecutive days because of weather since the Blizzard of 1888. The storm, as measured by the diameter of tropical storm-force sustained wind, was 820 miles across when it slammed into the New Jersey coast—more than double the landfall size of Hurricanes Isaac and Irene combined. New York City had a gasoline rationing system in effect for fifteen days and New Jersey for eleven days, with customers lined up at the pumps awaiting their allotted gas rations to power their electrical generators (if they were fortunate enough to have acquired one before the stores sold out in the run-up to the storm).

The New York State Department of Labor estimated the storm had wiped out thirty thousand jobs (McGeehan 2012). As with previous climate disasters in other cities, Sandy disproportionately harmed the most vulnerable. Approximately eighty thousand public housing residents in 402 buildings lost power, heat, and hot water—and power was not restored in many of the buildings for more than two weeks. One week after the storm, Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein laid out her signature campaign plank in an interview on PBS: “The Green New Deal,” she said, “calls for emergency action now, like we did after World War II, as if we had been attacked. Because we have been attacked by storms, drought, and flooding. In the process of building up green energy, we can put millions of people back to work” (Ponsot 2012).

While it is difficult to attribute any one weather event to climate change, climate scientists typically talk about the increased propensity for extreme storms as a result of the underlying changes in the climate caused by global warming. Warmer ocean temperatures and air temperatures, melting Arctic ice, rising sea levels, and shifting ocean and air currents can all lead to larger,
slower-moving storms that carry more water and maintain their intensity much longer. If left unchecked, climate change may pass a critical threshold, or tipping point, after which a tiny change can completely alter the state of the system, inciting catastrophes ranging from widespread drought to an overwhelming rise in the sea level (Russill and Nyssa 2009). In sum, the perceptions of the 78 percent of respondents in a Quinnipiac poll following the storm who “believe we are experiencing large storms such as Sandy and Irene more frequently as a result of climate change” were correct (Webley 2012). Climate change cannot be said to have “caused” Superstorm Sandy, but it did increase its likelihood and its intensity. And as the members of the New York City transportation, nurses, and public sector unions know all too well, those effects of climate change on weather can have devastating consequences for working people, both on the job and in their communities.

Changing Climate, Changing Society

Twenty-four years before Superstorm Sandy, on June 23, 1988, a hot and humid day in Washington, DC, NASA climate scientist James Hansen explained to Congress, and the world, that the heat-trapping gases emitted by the burning of fossil fuels were pushing global temperatures higher. His remarks that day marked the official opening of “the age of climate change.” In the years since Hansen’s testimony, the scientific community has affirmed that climate change is a serious cause for concern (Oreskes 2004, 1686). Over 97 percent of scientists agree that climate change is real, that it is caused overwhelmingly by the burning of fossil fuels, and that we are already feeling its effects right now (U.S. Global Change Research Program 2017). Each day, the seemingly mundane actions of billions of human beings, from turning on the lights to driving to work to cooking their meals, release billions of tons of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, including more than thirty billion tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per year (IPCC 2014; Levin 2018). These gases linger, accumulate, and trap heat inside the atmosphere, causing the average temperature of the planet to rise. The science of global warming is nothing new and is simple. The solution? Seemingly simpler—reduce GHG emissions into the atmosphere. The act of pursuing that solution? Perhaps the biggest challenge ever faced by humanity.

To reduce GHG emissions enough to slow global warming and prevent catastrophic climate change, humans must significantly reduce their burning of fossil fuels, and we must do it rapidly. In 2016, atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide surpassed 400 parts per million, which has caused a planetary warming of roughly 1°C (33.8°F) above preindustrial temperatures, when
CO$_2$ was estimated to be at just 280 parts per million (NOAA 2017). An average temperature rise of two degrees Celsius has been identified by scientists, including the authors of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report that informed the Paris Climate Accord, as a point at which most climate change becomes damaging (IPCC 2014). To keep global warming below that mark, global GHG emissions will need to be reduced to less than 50 percent of 1990 levels by 2050 and be on a path to zero emissions. To put that in perspective, it means there is room in the atmosphere to burn or vent less than one-quarter of all known oil, natural gas, and coal reserves (Allen et al. 2009).

The transition away from fossil fuels and toward 100 percent renewable energy can take many forms, or as scholars of institutions would say, there are several “modes of change” (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Thelen 2009). Given the political landscape of America, an abrupt “punctuation,” or radical shift within a short period of time, seems somewhat unlikely but is not beyond the realm of possibility. More likely is some sort of incrementalist approach, such as layering or displacement. Layering involves the addition of renewable infrastructure on top of the existing fossil fuel–based energy system. This approach, which is codified in the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA), is already under way—and indeed is generally supported by the same building trades unions that have been promoting oil pipelines such as the Keystone XL—but unfortunately, without phasing out fossil fuel infrastructure, layering will do little to reduce emissions, and the disparate impacts of climate change and pollution on environmental justice communities will continue. Displacement, on the other hand, involves the elimination of fossil fuels—a distinction that marks the divide between the unions supporting and those opposing new fossil fuel infrastructure. Displacement can happen in two primary ways: attrition and intentional change. Through attrition, old fossil infrastructure lives out its life span while only new green infrastructure is built, ultimately displacing all fossil fuels. Depending on the age of all existing infrastructure, this process may take too long to meet the scientifically recommended targets and do little to avoid possibly preventable climate injustices in the near term. Intentional change involves the planned phaseout of all fossils and replacement with renewables on a timeline informed by science. This sort of change can be pursued through regulations, market incentives, or direct government involvement in the energy sector.

Unfortunately for the climate, there has been little progress in reducing GHG emissions in the thirty years since James Hansen’s touchstone presentation on global warming. Much to his chagrin, the global levels of annual GHG emissions have increased by 30 percent in the intervening years, as have the
corporate profits of the major oil companies. “He’s a tragic hero,” said Naomi Oreskes of Hansen in an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper in 2018: “He’s cursed to understand and diagnose what’s going on, but unable to persuade people to do something about it. We are all raised to believe knowledge is power, but Hansen proves the untruth of that slogan. Power is power” (Milman 2018).

Fossil fuels remain the primary source of electricity, heat, and transportation for most of the world’s population, constituting 95 percent of transportation and 67 percent of electricity generation in the United States (Institute for Energy Research 2012; U.S. DOE 2017b). Their extraction, transportation, and sale on the market are also a source of tremendous profit for corporations, power for wealthy elites, and gainful employment for workers. Total profits for oil, gas, and coal companies operating in the United States and Canada were $257 billion in 2014 (Oil Change International 2015). At the start of 2017, over one million workers were employed in coal, oil, and natural gas extraction, transportation, and electricity generation in the United States (U.S. DOE 2017a). These levels of revenue generation and job creation in a capitalist economy—especially one governed by the logic of free market fundamentalism—translate into a tremendous base of support for fossil fuels continuing to be the primary source of energy. A radical reduction of fossil fuel use would equate to nothing less than, to borrow Polanyi’s phrase, a “great transformation” of the economy, the likes of which has not been seen since the Industrial Revolution, which ushered in the current era of wide-scale fossil fuel use (Polanyi 1944). Some argue that any attempt to drastically curb fossil fuel use will undermine the economy and leave us cold and in the dark. Others remind us of the perils of not rapidly and significantly reducing fossil fuel use—melting Arctic ice; rising sea levels; increased incidents of extreme weather such as droughts, flooding, wildfires, blizzards, hurricanes, and superstorms like Sandy; and the mass extinction of countless species, possibly including humans (Klein 2014; Kolbert 2014; McKibben 1989).

Many pose these two outcomes as an either-or situation in which people must choose between a thriving economy and a healthy planet but cannot have both. This line of reasoning is rooted in the dominant free market ideology of contemporary American capitalism, which largely eschews any government intervention in markets, and which explains the over-reliance on tax incentives as the primary vehicle for addressing climate change in the IRA. Fortunately, these two extreme situations need not be the only possible outcomes. The physical world is a complicated system—and the social world is no simpler—but scientific research, both physical and social, can inform our individual and collective decisions about how to confront the tremendous challenge we
now face. The key tasks for physical scientists are to measure GHG emissions and global temperatures, determine the relationships between these variables, evaluate the atmospheric and climatic limits, and devise technologies to reduce or replace fossil fuel consumption. The task reserved for social science is to understand the ways in which people and societies form an integral and differentiated part of the Earth’s delicate ecosystem, both creating the problem of climate change and simultaneously holding the key to its solution (Hackmann, Moser, and St. Clair 2014). Social scientists must dissect the societal, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of climate change and climate change mitigation, a process that will include identifying and understanding the sources of resistance to the changes necessary for society to avoid the most devastating effects of runaway climate change and the steps that can be taken to counteract this resistance. These “pillars of support” for business as usual include the workers and unions in the fossil fuel industry; however, they stand in contrast to the ongoing struggle by progressive union and climate justice activists to build broad support for a transition to renewable energy that confronts the climate crisis and addresses historical environmental injustices. It is this movement, which I refer to as the labor–climate movement (LCM) and which was born of the experiences by workers such as those in New York City after Sandy, that animates the pages and chapters that follow.

Confronting the Major Pillars of Support for the Fossil Fuel Regime

Social movements scholar Gene Sharp uses the term “pillars of support” to describe “institutions and sections of the society that supply the existing regime with sources of power required for maintenance and expansion of its power capacity” (2005, 12). According to Sharp, all nonviolent action is rooted in an understanding that power ultimately depends on the cooperation and obedience of large numbers of people acting through the institutions that constitute the power structure within a given field; these institutions are the pillars of support. Some of these pillars, such as the military, the police, and the courts, are coercive, compelling obedience through force or the threat thereof, while other pillars, like the media, education system, and religious institutions, support the system through their influence over culture and popular opinion. Others still, such as corporate profits and employment opportunities, support the system through their built-in economic incentives for shareholders, managers, and workers within the capitalist system.

From this perspective, power is contingent on the support of key institutions, themselves vulnerable to popular action or withdrawal of consent from
the general population. Once people decide they no longer accept the status quo, they engage in collective action framing to develop, propose, and seek to mobilize consensus around particular solutions (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986). Through the act of resistance, the balance of power shifts. Even the powerless can overcome great obstacles and achieve social change if members of the broader polity contribute resources—both material and cultural—to social movement attacks on powerful targets (Jenkins and Perrow 1977).

When considering the problem of climate change and the elimination of the entrenched fossil fuel regime, we can identify five major pillars of support: the fossil fuel industry, fossil-using industries, individual consumers, politicians, and fossil fuel workers and their unions. All of these pillars are underpinned by a powerful free market ideology that dictates what can and cannot be on the table for political discussion (Wright and Rogers 2015). In particular, government intervention in the market in order to solve collective problems—including climate change—is akin to heresy from this ideological perspective. As we shall see, undermining any one of these pillars of support requires climate protection advocates to pose some form of challenge to the underlying market ideology.

The first and most obvious pillar of support for continued fossil fuel use is the fossil fuel industry itself, whose primary product happens to be the cause of global climate change. Stated differently, true climate protection will require the abolition of fossil fuel use, essentially rendering the industry’s primary product worthless.

The second pillar of support for continued fossil fuel use—industries that use fossil fuel—comprises the myriad of other industries that rely on a cheap and abundant supply of fossil fuels to manufacture their own products, either as an energy source to power factories or as a raw ingredient in the production process, such as in the manufacture of plastics. For many of these industries, gas and oil fuel their end products: cars, trucks, tractors, and recreational vehicles such as motorcycles, campers, all-terrain vehicles, and boats, as well as power tools such as chain saws, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and wood chippers.

The third pillar of support is the individual fossil fuel consumer. Because 86 percent of Americans commute to work by car, there is a huge base of support for cheap and abundant gasoline (Florida 2011). Just think of the last time the governor in your state attempted to raise the gas tax to repair the potholed roads; it likely did not go over too well with voters.

The fourth pillar of support is politicians. Not all flavors of politician are supporters of the fossil fuel industry—some Democrats are even its presumptive enemies—but the elected officials who do support the industry are influ-
ential, and they receive tremendous economic support from fossil fuel companies. In fact, candidates who choose to run on a bold platform of GHG reductions are almost guaranteed to face a challenge from a competitor funded by the deep-pocketed fossil fuel industry, which is why so many elected leaders who purportedly support climate solutions by promoting green growth are not backing more proactive measures such as the Green New Deal.

The fifth and final pillar is workers and unions—the focus of this book. Workers in general occupy a historically unique position when it comes to the crisis of climate change because workers not only rely heavily on the use of fossil fuels to sustain their standard of living when away from work but also contribute to global warming when completing the daily tasks associated with their employment. Whether they drive trucks, manufacture petroleum-based products, operate power plants, operate a cash register in a retail store, or care for the elderly, workers to varying degrees are contributing to climate change by the very act of doing their jobs within our current political–economic structure.

Jeremy Brecher has referred to this conundrum as “climate alienation,” an extension of the Marxian concept of the alienation of labor (Brecher 2017; Marx and Engels 2009). For Karl Marx, “alienation” refers to a condition in which workers labor not for their own individual and collective ends but rather for those who control their labor. Although workers are autonomous, self-realized human beings, as economic entities their goals and activities are dictated by the bourgeoisie—who own the means of production—in such a way as to extract from them the greatest amount of surplus value possible. In other words, the alienation of labor leads workers to willingly engage in their own exploitation. Climate alienation represents a particular form of the alienation of labor in the contemporary era: workers produce through their own labor the GHGs that are destroying the climate they depend on for life. In other words, they are using their human capacities for their own destruction. Climate alienation, argues Brecher, is a feature of the way we work, day by day.

Climate alienation is also a feature of the collective political action of working people, making them a key pillar of support for fossil fuels as they tolerate or even promote the use of their labor in ways that lead to climate destruction. Through their unions and the broader labor movement, many workers have served as the strongest cheerleaders for fossil fuel companies, often siding with employers they have previously struggled against for better wages and working conditions, by now joining them to oppose environmental regulations that would reduce air pollution and GHG emissions.

For example, the UMWA protested the Obama administration’s Clean Power Plan, which set a goal of reducing GHG emissions to 68 percent of 2005 levels by the year 2030. This reduction would represent 870 million tons less
carbon pollution in the atmosphere. Citing the attack on their jobs, seven thousand union mine workers rallied and marched through the streets of Pittsburgh to protest the new rules before bringing their message to the doorstep of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Washington, DC. Along with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), which represents coal power plant operators, the UMWA joined the coal industry and the attorneys general of several coal-producing states in a lawsuit against the EPA claiming that the Clean Power Plan represented an unlawful overreach of authority. The conservative majority of the Supreme Court, with two new Trump appointees, sided with the industry in its 2022 *West Virginia vs. EPA* decision, stating that the EPA cannot put state-level caps on carbon emissions under the 1970 Clean Air Act. Importantly, these unions and others on the powerful AFL-CIO Energy Committee wield disproportionate influence within the labor movement. As we discuss in Chapter 3, they represent the position of incumbents in the labor–climate field, which means their views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the field.

Of the five pillars, this final one most clearly demonstrates the power of the hegemonic free market ideology that dominates modern political discourse in the United States; that is, workers in those industries generally see the false choice of deciding between having a healthy environment and having a good job as just another mundane feature of the natural order of the world. I refer to this as the “Jobs vs. the Environment” master frame, and it underpins the existing ensemble of discourses, identities, and practices that organize consent to the existing capitalist political arrangements in society (Gramsci 1971). However, dominant frames such as this are constantly being challenged, with greater or lesser degrees of success, because framing is ultimately a power struggle over who gets to define the situation—the use of collective agency to confront entrenched structural power. In the case of jobs and the environment, the emerging counterframe is “Clean Air and Good Jobs.” This counterframe fundamentally challenges the dominant capitalist free market ideology by envisioning an expansion of democracy beyond the formal political realm and into matters of the economy to provide for a just and sustainable society for all. It is portrayed vividly in Naomi Klein’s recent book and movie *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (Klein 2014; Lewis 2016), which states not only that capitalism will not save us from climate change but that it is in fact the cause of the problem and that the real solution will require breaking every rule in the free market playbook. The counterframe is also at the heart of the Green New Deal resolution introduced to the U.S. Congress by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey in 2019 (U.S. Congress 2019).
Successfully confronting the climate crisis will require challenging each of the five pillars of support as well as the dominant neoliberal ideology underpinning them. Massive investments in green infrastructure and green products will of course create tens of thousands of jobs—many of them unionized—but supporting green growth alone will not reduce GHG emissions or achieve climate justice. Fossil fuels must be phased out, which will require overcoming climate alienation and the debilitating Jobs vs. the Environment narrative that frames most contemporary discussions of work and climate change. The research conducted in this book focuses on the emerging LCM, a movement within U.S. labor to undermine the fifth column of support—workers and unions—in hopes of ultimately replacing the fossil fuel regime with a Green New Deal or equivalent large-scale plan to decarbonize the economy that will also protect workers and vulnerable communities. Their goal is to discredit the Jobs vs. the Environment master frame that elicits the complicity of workers with their own climate alienation and to supplant it with the more liberating Clean Air and Good Jobs counterframe to address “the biggest threat to our humanity.”

The mainstream environmental movement has focused on nature conservation and pollution reduction since the 1960s and has increasingly become an advocate for reducing carbon emissions in the past two decades. The movement has faced serious and legitimate criticisms for often ignoring the real consequences their efforts would have on workers. Also, the lack of understanding, historically, by most mainstream environmental groups of the racialized experience of pollution led to the rise of the environmental justice movement in the 1970s and 1980s and more recently the climate justice movement to promote equity in climate solutions. Many in labor have come to support green growth in the form of infrastructure investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency, as was the case with the IRA of 2022, but most continue to avoid the issue of closing fossil fuel plants and addressing environmental justice concerns. The LCM seeks to build bridges between all of these movements by centering worker and community voices in shaping the transition away from fossil fuels, although the task will not be easy. For example, many in labor mistrust environmentalists on the basis of previous experiences of protesters demanding their workplaces be closed. Many in the climate justice movement remain skeptical of those in labor because of past experiences with building trades and fossil fuel unions supporting the construction and operation of polluting plants in predominantly minority neighborhoods.

Although weakened in recent decades, labor still represents the most influential, organized political voice of the working class in the country. And compared with many other movements, their ability to turn out voters in key elec-
tions is a real source of power and influence. Union workers, like everyone else, will be affected by climate change, especially those from historically marginalized communities. At the same time, their members’ livelihoods may also be affected by measures taken to mitigate climate change. The extent to which they will act to protect the narrow job interests of some workers in the fossil fuel sector or the broader class interests of all workers, including those from disproportionately affected communities, is uncertain and depends largely on the actions taken by activists within the movement to change labor’s narrative, and thus action, around climate change.

As we can see, the overlapping nature of the pillars of support has led some unions to adopt the Jobs vs. the Environment frame to defend jobs in the fossil fuel industry while simultaneously promoting a green growth agenda. Others who embrace the Clean Air and Good Jobs frame have divergent solutions for how best to achieve this goal and align more closely with the growing climate justice movement. The difference is due in part to the structural features of our economy, particularly the industries in which they work and their unique organizational forms—what I refer to in Chapter 3 as their position within the labor–climate spectrum. This ongoing struggle over collective action framing within labor will ultimately influence the types of climate legislation unions will support. Will it be a green growth approach of layering that does not directly confront the fossil fuel regime? Will it be a set of safety-net protections for workers in the event of job displacement? Or will it be a proactive Green New Deal that displaces fossil fuels, creates jobs, and promotes climate justice?

High-profile cases like the historic struggle between timber workers and defenders of the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest have reinforced the Jobs vs. the Environment narrative, creating the misperception that unions are opposed to environmental protection measures (Brecher 2014; Foster 1993). However, there are countless instances of cooperation between labor and the environmental movement as well, including joint support for environmental legislation such as the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts that led to the formation of the EPA (Dewey 1998; Obach 2004). The part of the spotted owl saga that is not well-known publicly is that unions and environmentalists ultimately came together and cooperated to conserve areas of the old-growth forests designated for spotted owl protection while allowing responsible logging activities to continue in the region (Associated Press 1989).

Such historical examples offer great insight into the prospects for the emerging LCM to achieve its goal of building a working-class environmental movement within U.S. labor that is aligned more closely with the demands of the growing climate justice movement. The internal resistance represented by LCM activists engaged in collective action framing contests within unions currently
suggests a fracture in the fifth pillar and a potential crumbling of labor support for the fossil fuel regime. But that future is neither imminent nor inevitable. As history has shown, the labor movement itself can serve as a battleground for some of the most pressing issues of a given era, and it is littered with failures along with its successes.

**Motivation for This Research**

Since its inception, the history of climate change research has been solidly rooted in the physical and natural sciences, with the social sciences largely ignored and absent from major national and international reports (Bjurström and Polk 2011). This is both perplexing and injurious, considering that human activity has been identified as the leading contributor to the GHG emissions that have contributed to the global warming process since the Industrial Revolution (IPCC 2014)—so much so that the current era has been termed the Anthropocene to acknowledge the extent to which human activity has become interconnected with natural forces such that the fate of one is interconnected with the fate of the other (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010).

Despite their early exclusion, the social science community has been increasingly contributing to the study of climate change. Because the key drivers of human-caused, or anthropogenic, climate change are rooted in the daily routines of social life and the social organization of modern societies, sociology uniquely offers important theoretical and methodological insights for assessing climate change, climate change mitigation, and climate adaptation. Acknowledging this fact, the major professional organization for sociologists, the American Sociological Association, formed the Task Force on Sociology and Global Climate Change in 2010. The task force then published an edited volume titled *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives*, which proposes a framework for the ways in which sociologists can help understand the societal origins of climate change as well as how various social, political, economic, and cultural factors are likely to affect efforts to address climate change (Dunlap and Brulle 2015).

In sum, Dunlap and Brulle contend that sociology brings two distinct and advantageous approaches to the study of climate change: it is well equipped to study the social structures, institutions, and cultural values that contribute to climate change and that can either help or hinder efforts to address it; and it is a critical discipline that is relatively untethered to contemporary hegemonic political–economic belief systems such as market fundamentalism or neoliberalism. An additional and related consideration is the rise of “public sociology,” or the increasingly deliberate effort by some sociologists in recent years
to engage the public beyond the academy on sociological issues of public concern. As sociologist Michael Burawoy (2004) notes, sociology has a particular interest in the defense of civil society—including unions and voluntary associations—that is beleaguered by the encroachment of markets and states. In the case of labor and climate change, civil society is the best terrain for the defense of humanity—a defense that can be aided by a critical, public sociology.

In the chapters that follow, I examine the social dynamics and framing processes of the “movement within the movement” that began pushing American labor to take a strong stand on climate change in the years leading up to the introduction of the Green New Deal resolution in early 2019. The research is motivated by my experiences as a local union officer and as an active member of various unions throughout my life (including the American Federation of Teachers [AFT], LIUNA, UAW, and United Brotherhood of Carpenters [UBC]). In addition, as the founding president of the Graduate Employee Union, UAW Local 6950 at the University of Connecticut, I knew that climate change, among many other issues, was something our members cared about. After reaching out to members through one-on-one organizing, we formed a Social, Environmental, and Economic Justice Committee. From there we began our work on climate justice issues at the university level, then the state level, and ultimately the national level, which brought me into contact with other union leaders and activists from around the United States who were pursuing similar goals. In sum, these activists were trying to get their unions, state labor confederations, and the national union confederation (the AFL-CIO) to recognize climate justice as a core labor issue that the movement would throw its organizing and advocacy strength behind.

To be sure, the labor movement has a long history of supporting working-class interests that go beyond the often narrow and immediate interests of just their members, from promoting minimum wage laws and other social safety-net measures to pushing for health and safety standards for all workers. LCM activists contend that climate change poses a real threat to workers’ livelihoods, health, and safety—in particular for the least well-off—and thus is a working-class issue. Further, they acknowledge that the changes necessary to address climate change go beyond just supporting green growth and will certainly cost some people their jobs in the fossil fuel industry and energy sector as we reduce GHG emissions and pursue climate justice. Rather than expending tremendous resources and effort to save jobs that are doomed to expire eventually, these activists are urging labor to be proactive by advocating for strong measures such as those included in the Green New Deal to assist workers through a planned period of transition before their jobs are eliminated. They also understand that a transition away from fossil fuels means a transition into some other renew-
able fuel sources, which would be a source of new jobs that could be organized and could possibly provide an opportunity to undo past injustices along the lines of race and gender.

On a more personal level, this research is also motivated by my sincere desire to help inform ongoing efforts to save the planet from climate catastrophe. As an avalanche of scientific evidence attests, climate change is real, it is caused by human activity, we are already experiencing its effects, and it is the greatest threat and challenge humankind has ever faced. As a father of three children, I am deeply concerned about the habitability of the world we will leave for them and their children as they grow up. In his second inaugural address, just before the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said, “There is no greater injustice than to wring your profits from the sweat of another man’s brow.” If he were alive today, Lincoln’s words might be repurposed to fit the contemporary era: “There is no greater injustice than to wring your profits from the habitability of the Earth your children and grandchildren will inherit.” The scale of intergenerational injustice that we are all witnessing is almost incomprehensible until you consider that counteracting such temporal wrongs requires sacrifice in the present. And given the dominant free market ideology governing much of the world today and the corresponding individualistic culture of material consumption, the profit interests of capitalist corporations selling those consumer goods outweigh the promise of life, liberty, and a livable planet for future generations. Unless we can find a means of successfully challenging this ideology, a way of “changing everything,” to paraphrase Naomi Klein (2014), future generations face certain environmental catastrophe, or at the least, a considerably less desirable planet on which to toil and live.

**Primary Research Questions and Methods**

The primary question guiding this study of the nascent LCM is this: How, in the face of great structural obstacles, can social actors, through collective action framing processes, move the position and ultimately the actions of an entire movement? The accompanying narrative is that (1) there is a political–economic structure underpinning the positions of many unions; but (2) through the act of framing, social actors are using their agency to attempt to redefine the situation and shift the ideological perspective of workers and unions to see alternative paths forward; (3) it is in the contestation over the definition of just transition that the nature of the alternative path is being shaped; and (4) the results of such contests ultimately influence the ability of LCM activists to shift labor away from the Jobs vs. the Environment frame and toward support for sustainability, jobs, and climate justice.
To interrogate this narrative, I formulate specific questions in three key areas: questions regarding political–economic structure, questions regarding social agency, and questions that examine the interplay of structure and agency. For the sake of this book, “structure” is defined simply as the stable patterns of interaction among the members of a society, institution, or organization. “Agency” refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. Structure and agency are often codetermined; that is, structural factors can influence and limit the decisions of agents, while at the same time, the actions of agents can sometimes reshape social structures. The particular questions raised in the remaining chapters are the following:

• What key structural features of the capitalist political economy and the U.S. labor movement lead some unions to adopt the Jobs vs. the Environment master frame, alienating themselves from the climate and serving as a key pillar of support for the fossil fuel industry?

• How do the activists who have formed an LCM within the labor movement come to understand climate as a labor issue, rejecting the Jobs vs. the Environment frame and instead promoting the counterframe of Clean Air and Good Jobs?

• What solutions to the dual crises of climate and inequality do LCM activists offer? Whom do they target? And what tactics do they deploy to achieve the goal of Clean Air and Good Jobs?

• How does their collective understanding of the problem and possible solutions interact with the existing political landscape to either help or hinder their efforts to achieve the goal of Clean Air and Good Jobs?

To answer these questions, I engage in a three-pronged qualitative analysis consisting of participant observation; semi-structured, in-depth interviews; and content analysis of original source documents.

For the participant observation component of data collection, I was actively and openly involved with three labor–climate social movement organizations (SMOs) from October 2014 through August 2018: one at the state level, one at the national level, and one international organization. I gained access to each organization through my role as president of my local union. I also conducted fifty semi-structured interviews (thirty-four between 2014 and 2018, during my participant observation period, and sixteen between 2019 and 2022) with key participants from the three labor–climate SMOs examined in this study. Interviews ranged from sixty to ninety minutes with several targeted follow-up
interviews lasting up to four hours. All interview participants were recruited from the three SMO sites of my participant observation, and they included a combination of top leaders as well as rank-and-file participants of the organizations. The one restricting criterion for inclusion in this study was past or present regular participation in one of the three labor–climate SMOs—single-time or first-time activists were excluded from participation. Apart from public comments made by organizational leaders, the names of all participants were replaced with pseudonyms, with the ultimate goal of confidentiality for every research participant. The content analysis involved a close reading of all SMO publications, including policy papers, newsletters, and official statements by the three organizations.

The timing of the participant observation proved to be fortuitous because it encapsulated the years leading up to the introduction of the Green New Deal resolution in Congress. Interviews and content analyses in the following years captured the ways in which movement participants adapted to the changing political opportunity structure brought on not only by the introduction of the Green New Deal vision but also by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration, marking perhaps the greatest opportunity yet to address climate change. In sum, the book marshals two forms of data to carry the narrative forward: anonymized case observations in the middle chapters and tangible examples in the later chapters. The first form of data is needed to protect confidentiality while offering qualitatively rich insights into labor–climate activism, and the second form of data is used to situate the efforts of the anonymized cases within familiar political terrain.

**Studying the Labor-Climate Movement: Three Case Sites**

Three organizations were selected for this study, each representing a different geographic level of operation. The actual names of the three SMOs have been replaced with pseudonyms to help protect the privacy of participants. The first is a state-level organization, which I call the State Partnership for Employment and Climate (SPEC). The second is a national-level organization, which I call Unions for a Sustainable Economy (USE). The third is an international organization, which I call Labor Unions for Public Energy (LUPE).

These three SMOs were selected on the basis of a variety of criteria, including their relationship to one another (i.e., some cooperation and overlap of participants), their geographic diversity (state/local, national, international),
and my ability to participate in all three organizations contemporaneously. Most important, they are prototypical labor–climate organizations, as judged by two defining criteria: independence from established labor leadership and a focus on decarbonization. First, these three organizations are not controlled by established leaders of the labor movement or any particular union, but rather they represent grassroots, cross-union initiatives with a focus on influencing the direction of labor as a whole from within.

Second, the three organizations selected for this study have taken a strong stance on climate change, demanding meaningful reductions in carbon emissions—not just supporting green jobs or carbon capture technologies, as other groups, such as the Apollo Alliance and the BlueGreen Alliance, have done historically. In fact, the LCM arose as a response to the inadequacy of merely supporting green investments, infrastructure, and manufacturing to create jobs without also taking on the more difficult task of eliminating fossil fuels, which has real job-loss implications. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the LCM is situated within the sphere of the “blue–greens,” a broader group within labor that supports green growth but does not push for emission-reduction targets. Together with the blue–greens, they are situated within the labor movement.

![Figure 1.1 The Labor–Climate Movement in Relation to Associated Movements](image)
as a whole, which has some overlap with the environmental movement and the climate movement.7

Importantly, the LCM also overlaps partially with the growing climate justice movement, positioning it in a central and potentially strategic location for helping to build a broad-based coalition of labor, environmental, and climate activists fighting for climate solutions that center the needs of both workers and vulnerable communities. The concept of climate justice acknowledges that climate change has differing social, economic, and health impacts on underprivileged populations. Climate justice activists, rooted in Indigenous, African American, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander, and poor white communities on the front lines of the climate crisis, share legacies of colonialism along with racial and economic oppression and strive to have these inequities addressed head-on in all climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. Like the environmental justice movement that arose in response to the mainstream environmental movement’s lack of focus on issues of justice, or its occasional active promotion of injustice through “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) campaigns, climate justice movement organizations such as the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) arose in response to the broader climate movement’s lack of attention to racial and gender inequities embedded in climate change and its potential solutions.

While not the focus of the current study, the climate justice movement does interact frequently with the LCM and is touched on sporadically throughout this book. The key point at which the two movements either align or diverge is in the demands that are made around transitioning the economy away from fossil fuels. In particular, the question is whether labor’s plan will center equity, addressing past social, economic, and environmental injustices along the lines of race, class, and gender, or focus exclusively on protections for fossil fuel union members, often at the expense of underprivileged communities. As we indicate in later chapters, many in the LCM share the goals of the climate justice movement and even participate in both movements, while others remain focused largely on protecting unionized workers only.

Each of the three labor–climate SMOs examined in this research is made up of participants from the labor movement, including leaders of local, state, and regional unions acting in official and unofficial capacities and rank-and-file union members concerned with climate change as a labor issue. Many individuals are also involved in local environmental, climate, or climate justice organizations in addition to their unions. In some instances, unions participated in the SMOs as organizational affiliates or partners on particular campaigns. The history, mission, and organizational structure of each SMO, as well as the nature of my involvement with each organization, is sketched out below.
State Partnership for Employment and Climate

SPEC, the state-level organization, was formed in 2012 as a partnership between a faith-based environmental justice organization and representatives from several labor unions in a northern state. The foundational meeting occurred after the close of the state’s AFL-CIO convention in 2012, when several labor, environmental, climate, and faith leaders agreed to continue a discussion about labor and climate that had begun earlier. In its mission statement, SPEC states that it “seeks to strengthen collaboration among [the state’s] labor, environmental, and religious groups in advocating for public policies that address urgent concerns about climate change while creating good-paying jobs right here in our state.” It goes on to say its goal is “to build a worker-oriented environmental movement organizing to secure a fair and just transition that protects not only the environment but also the livelihoods threatened by both climate change and the steps taken toward mitigation and adaptation.”

At the time I left the field, SPEC comprised fourteen affiliated organizations, including six labor organizations, four environmental organizations, three faith-based organizations, and one community group. Beyond the official affiliates, many other organizations and individuals—including other labor organizations—participated loosely in SPEC over the period I was in the field. The affiliated organizations paid dues to support the work of the organization and selected one liaison to serve as the intermediary between their organization and SPEC. During my time of participation, I served as the liaison for my union and attended various SPEC meetings and events, including press conferences, public engagement events, and lobby days. As mentioned earlier, my participation in SPEC predates the initiation of this research, and my interaction with the organization inspired this project.

SPEC is governed by a Steering Committee consisting mostly of participants who attended the group’s foundational meeting. The organizational liaisons, such as I, served as a second tier of governance. In union terms, the Steering Committee is analogous to the executive board of a union, and the liaisons are the shop stewards who handle much of the on-the-ground organizing, attend all meetings or events, and provide valuable input in decision-making. SPEC has just one part-time, paid staff organizer, and most of the management of the organization typically takes place by biweekly conference calls by members of SPEC’s Steering Committee.

SPEC also holds regular meetings at least twice each year to bring together the Steering Committee, liaisons, and other supporters to discuss specific events or campaigns the various constituencies agree to work on together. The Steering Committee then takes these ideas to its semiannual strategic planning sessions.
to set priorities for the next six months. The activist agenda that is adopted at these meetings is determined by the interests of participating organizations and the ability of the different constituencies to find common-ground issues in pursuit of the organizational mission of addressing climate change and creating jobs. Two examples of campaigns include one supporting a state program to make public buildings more energy efficient using in-state, unionized labor to do the construction work and another promoting legislation to reduce and cap the fixed electricity rates charged by the two monopoly electric companies in the state. These and other examples are discussed in further detail in Chapter 6.

**Unions for a Sustainable Economy**

The national-level organization, USE, did not have a formal affiliation process for unions to join and pay dues as SPEC did during my time in the field. Rather, supportive unions were encouraged to vote or pass resolutions stating that they agreed with the set of guiding principles laid out by USE on its website. Lacking membership dues, USE secures most of its funding through competitive grants. However, near the end of my observation period, the organization rolled out an individual and organizational member drive to gain financial commitments from individual participants and make membership more formal, but no such affiliation structure was established for unions or other organizations during the years of my participant observation. Unlike SPEC, USE had three or four part-time staff members who handled everything from administration and organizing to graphic design, website management, research, and writing.

USE was founded in 2009 by a group of labor activists, spearheaded by a former leader in the top rung at the AFL-CIO, to confront labor’s negligence on the issue of climate change as well as the apparent inattention by environmentalists to the economic issues of jobs and income inequality. The following excerpt from the organization’s mission statement provides further detail:

We believe that workers and environmentalists must be engaged together in order for our society to address the dual deepening crises of both climate and income inequality. We further believe that the environmental movement should have a jobs program of its own and should not leave the jobs piece up to labor. We believe that the labor movement should become a part of the solution to the climate crisis and have a climate program of its own because it is in their core self-interest, rather than leaving climate protection up to the environmental movement. In other words, we believe both movements need to move beyond
simply trying to understand and even honor each other’s core missions and begin to internalize how their missions are truly intertwined.

One of the cofounders explained to me in an interview that the organization was based on an understanding that long-term sustainability cannot be achieved without combining three elements:

- Environmental protection, in particular addressing climate change by cutting carbon emissions dramatically
- Economic fairness, in particular addressing income inequality and the lack of good jobs
- Social justice, in particular eliminating prejudice and structural racism and defending human rights, civil rights, and democracy

USE is governed by a ten-person board that meets regularly by phone or videoconference. The group typically organizes semiannual or annual in-person meetings with participants. These meetings are organized by steering committees of participants who meet monthly or biweekly via conference calls to plan gatherings that typically focus on the labor–climate connection. Finally, USE hosts regular teleconference meetings as well as frequent webinars with dozens of individual activists from various participating unions across the United States. Participants in calls engage in dialogue and develop strategies to promote the mission of the organization. As with so many SMOs, the nature of particular campaigns, including the messaging, strategies, and tactics deployed by USE, depend in large part on who shows up, but the vision of the founders always serves as the guiding light for all actions. The principal founder and current president, who has a strong background in the labor movement, is highly respected and viewed by participants as a strong role model for other national-level leaders who must gather the courage to take a stand on climate change.

Being a national organization, USE drew a pool of labor leaders and activists from a diverse set of unions and geographic regions in the country. That being said, there often was more participation by leaders and members of unions from the states of the East and West Coasts than states in either the Midwest or the South. At the first national in-person meeting, there were about 65 participants from unions on the East and West Coasts. The second meeting was attended by over 130 participants, with a few more attendees from the South and Midwest, but participants were still predominantly from the Northeast and the West Coast. Both of these meetings were held on the East Coast, near
Washington, DC. The third and last major meeting I attended was held in a midwestern state and brought greater involvement from that region, attracting more than 300 participants, including a contingent of leaders and activists from the climate justice movement.

As with SPEC, I participated in USE on behalf of my local union, but in this case, there was no official title such as “liaison.” During my time in the field, I helped build support for national campaigns at the local level in my state and within my union. I also served on the planning committees that worked to design and organize participation for the two national in-person meetings mentioned above. I also coauthored a newspaper editorial highlighting the findings of some research commissioned by the organization, which found that investments in renewables in a particular state would create more jobs than further investments in fossil fuels.

**Labor Unions for Public Energy**

The third organization, LUPE, describes itself as an international initiative “to advance democratic direction and control of energy in a way that promotes solutions to the climate crisis, energy poverty, the degradation of both land and people, and responds to the attacks on workers’ rights and protections.” The organization formed in 2012 as a result of a three-day global trade union roundtable about energy transition organized by a labor scholar at an American university. Seventy trade unionists and policy experts from nineteen countries, including several preeminent U.S. climate scientists, participated in the roundtable. The attendees responded to a call decrying “the existence of a global climate emergency, marked by the unimpeded use of fossil fuels, the growing power and political influence of oil, coal and gas companies, and the inadequacy of present market-based approaches to energy transition.” At the time, the governments of the world had failed to negotiate a global climate agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (the Paris Climate Accord would come three years later, in 2015). At the end of the three-day meeting, the group articulated the need for democratic direction and control of energy.

Following the roundtable, unions from around the world were invited to join LUPE and designate a representative to serve on its advisory group. Although I did not attend the foundational meeting, I did become the representative for my union on the advisory group once I became involved in 2014. At the time I exited the field, there were forty-seven participating unions or union confederations from eighteen different countries. Although LUPE is
international, I focus primarily on U.S. labor participation in the organization, which consisted of twelve unions. LUPE is led in large part by an executive director and three staff members, who coordinate quarterly videoconference meetings as well as various in-person meetings around the world—usually two or three per year in the United States—to help participating unions and activists advance the mission of the organization. The direction of LUPE is largely guided by the core staff members but is informed by input from representatives on the advisory group, with one caveat: the participants have acknowledged that they believe democratic control of the energy sector is key to addressing the problems of climate change and jobs. It is important to note that previous research has found that unions around the world have generally engaged earlier and more deeply with the issue of climate change than their counterparts in the United States; thus, it should not be a surprise that participants in this SMO espouse the most radical solutions to the climate crisis of the three organizations examined in this study (Farnhill 2014, 2016; Hampton 2015; Hyde and Vachon 2019; Räthzel and Uzzell 2013; Snell and Fairbrother 2010).

Outline of the Chapters

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides key historical insights into labor’s relationship to environmental issues in the United States—offering a macrostructural understanding of the fundamental relationship between capitalist political economy and the environment. Key to this issue are the ideas of job consciousness and class consciousness, which animate competing perspectives on the purpose and goals of the labor movement. These perspectives manifest themselves in the two opposing ideal typical categories of U.S. unions: “pure and simple” business unions and social movement unions.

Chapter 3 builds from the discussion of the historical structural features of labor–environmental relations that was started in Chapter 2 by offering a snapshot of the present in what I call the labor–climate spectrum. The labor–climate spectrum is an illustration that situates unions, classified by their industry, along a spectrum based on their stance on the issues of climate change and justice. This heuristic device offers insight into the relative positions of unions on the issue of climate change, which will be useful for understanding the formation, goals, and tactics of the LCM as well as the tensions that embolden this movement within a movement. The spectrum builds a bridge between the structural factors of labor–climate relations described in Chapter 2 and the social actions of movement participants seeking to effect change by altering the narrative around labor and climate justice. The spectrum also al-
allows for a rudimentary assessment of the effectiveness of LCM activists in their efforts to move labor as a whole toward supporting climate justice. Chapters 2 and 3 will be especially informative for readers that may be less familiar with U.S. labor and environmentalism.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 move the discussion away from the structural factors that shape labor–climate relations and shift the focus to the collective action framing processes and tactics engaged in by movement actors during my years in the field, 2014–2018. If we think of Chapters 2 and 3 as describing a game board and establishing the positions of various pieces on that board, then Chapters 4 through 6 can be seen as describing players’ actions that move the pieces, both on the existing board and in efforts to change the board altogether. In particular, those chapters will explore the negotiation of meanings by movement activists as they define the social problem they are confronting, identify the key targets of the movement, and construct possible solutions.

In sum, LCM participants define the problem in the following ways:

- Unmitigated climate change poses a serious threat to all people, but particularly workers and people from vulnerable “frontline communities,” including communities of color, Tribal communities, poor and working-class communities, deindustrialized communities, and depopulated rural communities.
- Most mitigation strategies currently under consideration pose a threat to the livelihoods and well-being of workers and their communities.
- The culture of the mainstream environmental movement is not considering working-class interests in their efforts to address climate change and is often pushing for mitigation strategies that would hurt workers, reinforce existing environmental injustices, and invigorate the Jobs vs. the Environment master frame.
- To its own peril, the culture of the labor movement as a whole has prevented it from actively fighting for real solutions to climate change that incorporate working-class interests, and in many cases unions continue to serve as a major pillar of support for fossil fuels.

From this diagnosis, LCM activists identify three direct targets to which they attribute blame—the state, the culture of the mainstream environmental movement, and the culture of the labor movement itself—and a number of indirect targets, including capital.8

The common solution offered by LCM activists is a “just transition” to a more sustainable economy. However, while the solution was regularly conveyed by participants from all three of the organizations studied, the exact meaning
of “just transition” was contested because multiple distinct frames could be identified, ranging from relatively moderate to transformatively radical in their prognosis. I name the three frames protective just transition, proactive just transition, and transformative just transition.9

The first frame, protective just transition, most closely mirrors the original concept of just transition put forth by the labor–environmental activists who coined the term in the 1990s when considering how best to build worker support for the closing of plants that were causing harm to worker and community health and safety. The protective frame focuses on providing a safety net for fossil fuel workers and their local communities when they lose their jobs as a result of the shift away from coal and oil to renewable energy sources. The second, proactive just transition, provides similar protections for workers and communities but also envisions a large-scale World War II–style mobilization to decarbonize the whole economy, with unions being part of a “social partnership” to draft a Green New Deal that would create millions of good, green jobs while phasing out fossil fuel use in an orderly manner. An open question within this frame is the extent to which the demands will overlap with those of the climate justice movement in seeking to remedy past harms and injustices along the lines of race and gender or whether it will be focused solely on helping displaced workers and creating new jobs as part of the decarbonization process.

The third, transformative just transition, incorporates the elements of the first two frames and also challenges the fundamental and intertwined logics of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy by insisting that to be successful, the transition to sustainable energy requires public ownership and control of the energy sector. It further demands that the transition must incorporate remedies to the previous inequalities, such as environmental and racial injustices, that have been embedded in the for-profit energy system (Sweeney and Treat 2018). This transformative vision of just transition mirrors Naomi Klein’s central thesis in This Changes Everything (2014). As noted earlier, the point at which the LCM and the climate justice movement intersect is within the contested definition of a just transition. There is room within both the proactive and the transformative frames for addressing historical social injustices, but the transformative frame aligns most closely with the definition of “just transition” put forth by most climate justice activists. In addition to these three frames, I also identify one counterframe I call oppositional, which captures the resistance to just transition by some unions and workers who see it as merely shorthand for job loss.

Chapter 6 explores the tactical repertoires of the three LCM organizations in this study as they pursued collective action against the state, mainstream
environmentalists, and the labor movement. In that chapter, I describe all of the actions undertaken by each SMO during my time in the field to give the reader a sense of the tactical repertoire of each and then examine one signature campaign for each group. Finally, I explore how the selection of targets, vulnerabilities of these targets, political opportunity structures for the targets, choice of collective action frames, and choice of tactics are interrelated. In sum, I find that the selection of targets and in particular the vulnerabilities of the targets and the existing political opportunity structure can shape the tactics used by movements (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1983; Walker, Martin, and McCarthy 2008). However, I also find an interesting interplay between collective action frames, political opportunities, and tactics. In particular, I identify the possibility of a frame-shifting process in which SMOs not only modify their tactical repertoires in response to changing opportunity structures but also shift their framing to find the optimal alignment of framing, opportunity, and tactics for particular campaigns.

Chapter 7 looks closely at the shifts in the political opportunity structure for the LCM that occurred between 2018 and 2022. My fieldwork, which I elaborate on in Chapters 4–6, was very well timed as it led up to the introduction of the Green New Deal resolution in Congress, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unprecedented protests for Black lives, and the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, all of which radically reshaped the political terrain on which the LCM operates and helped to facilitate the passage of the insufficient, but important IRA of 2022. Building from the analyses of participant observation data in previous chapters, in Chapter 7 I examine how LCM activists responded to these changes in the opportunity structure and explore the question of whether the movement has had any success in pursuing its goals of moving labor to a more pro-climate position and forging support for a just transition within the labor and environmental movements as well as in public policy formation.

The conclusion, Chapter 8, summarizes and synthesizes the key findings of this study by characterizing the modes of change pursued by LCM activists and envisioning three possible futures facing the LCM that correspond with the just transition frames presented in the book. The main findings of the book are related back to the story in the preface to consider the rationale for the inclusion of economic and social protections, including a jobs guarantee, unionization rights, and universal healthcare, into the Green New Deal resolution as sponsored by Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Markey (U.S. Congress 2019). The Green New Deal and other similar plans are imagined as a space of contention—between opposition, limited support in the form of green growth, and full-throated support for a just transition to a
regenerative economy—but also as a powerful vehicle with the potential for moving labor as a whole from the protective to the proactive and perhaps ultimately to the transformative frame for just transition.

The Journey Begins

The experiences of workers in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy in 2012 and so many other extreme weather events, such as Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria in 2017—which ravaged parts of Florida and Texas and caused catastrophic damage to the island of Puerto Rico—are leading many to see the real effects of climate change on their livelihoods and well-being. Heat waves, rising sea levels, droughts, loss of biodiversity, and wildfires all affect the lives of working people. This book explores the efforts of LCM activists, within their unions, communities, and society, to reframe the problem and take action to promote a Green New Deal or something similar that will produce a climate-safe future for all working people by both creating good jobs and reducing GHG emissions. This effort will require educating and organizing not only fellow union members and leaders but also a critical mass of all working people and building solidarity with activists from the environmental and climate justice movements. Given the tremendous power of the fossil fuel industry, with several pillars of support—including politicians and parts of the labor movement itself—and the underlying dominant neoliberal ideology in American society, this is no small task. Labor’s checkered history pertaining to environmental issues, driven largely by a structural tension between the need to protect jobs and the need to protect workers, between job consciousness and class consciousness, provides both challenges and opportunities for LCM activists using their agency to win over the hearts and minds of fellow union members and leaders to turn a key pillar of support for fossil fuels into a powerful advocate for Clean Air and Good Jobs.

In what follows, I take the reader on a journey that explores the structural challenges faced by this movement as well as the social processes within the movement to increase our understanding of how various political actors can best construct linkages among economic, social, and environmental reform agendas; which strategies are most successful for building broad support; and which forms of alliances are most conducive to supporting a rapid transition to a sustainable economy before the world passes a climate tipping point. Where will this journey take us? Toward a broad transformation of our economy and society that addresses the immediate concerns of workers and frontline communities while making the climate safe and habitable for future generations? Such a transition will not come easily: it requires both the moral and political
will to build coalitions, create new centers of power, generate broad public support, and, when necessary, compensate victims of economic shifts. It is my hope that the knowledge this research offers can help build the broad-based, durable political consensus necessary to win a comprehensive climate protection policy that prioritizes providing a habitable Earth with an equitable economy for current and future generations first.