

# Reclaiming the role of labour environmentalism in Just Transitions

From its inception in the North American labour movement all the way to its inclusion in the Paris Agreement and current level of global proliferation, the concept of Just Transition has reached the pinnacle of global policy debates. Drawing on contributions to the Just Transition Research Collaborative (JTRC) project and a recently published volume<sup>1</sup>, we highlight the importance of historicising and rooting the Just Transition concept in the frontline communities and unions that are most directly affected and that initially imagined it. This, we believe, is key to ensuring that Just Transition is not simply a fashionable catchword but a concept that actually contributes to a socially just low-carbon transition.

## Just Transition: The Making and Globalisation of a Contested Concept

*The Origins of Just Transition:* While the term ‘just transition’ was first used in 1995, it was part of an explicit strategy by unions and environmental justice activists in the USA and Canada that can be traced to the late 1980s. Drawing upon the US federal Superfund policy to clean up polluted sites, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union suggested a Superfund for Workers in chemicals, weapons, and other toxic industries. The strategy of the union envisioned a robust green industrial policy, strong occupational, health and environmental rights and standards, alongside universal health care and the formation of an independent labour party. During the 1990s, US and Canadian unions promoted the strategy in collaboration with the environmental justice and elements of the environmental movement and in the context of systematic discussions between unions and environmentalists<sup>2</sup>. Just Transition fell off the US and Canadian union and environmentalist agenda after 2001.

*The Globalisation of Just Transition:* The concept survived, however, because global union organisations, in collaboration with a number of national unions, including in the UK, Spain, Australia and South Africa, globalised the concept from the late 1990s onwards (Rosemberg 2020). The Spanish Comisiones Obreras and the associated Sustainlabour and ITUC, played a critical role in the diffusion of labour environmentalism globally, mainstreaming the Just Transition concept within international climate and environmental debates and processes<sup>3</sup>. During the Great Recession, when proposals for green jobs and green growth became more popular nationally and amongst intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), these unions sought to ensure that Just Transition remained on the agenda.

*Just Transitions Everywhere:* More recently, the uptake of Just Transition has accelerated. Global climate activists started seeing its value and some transferred it back to their national movements. The ILO adopted its Just Transition guidelines in 2015. The ITUC established the Just Transition Centre (JTC) in 2016 and has pursued close collaboration between labour and sympathetic business (Moussu 2020). Other IGOs are also engaging the concept, as are various philanthropic and civil society organisations. Just Transition policies have been adopted by countries, such as Canada and Spain, by subnational units, such as Colorado and Scotland and by cities, such as Longmont, Colorado, and Jackson, Mississippi (Akuno 2020). C40, the global network of megacities has expressed its commitment to Just Transition. The growing number of references to Just Transition has increased the range of understandings of what it should mean, from more conventional and mainstream corporate social responsibility proposals to more transformative ideas that confront the current neoliberal economic system. A necessary step, therefore, is to identify and reflect on the various meanings and operationalisations of Just Transitions.

## Unions and Just Transitions Today

Despite its union origins, Just Transition remains a contested concept within the world of labour. Some unions, particularly in extraction and construction, oppose Just Transition, due to both concerns over the implications of a transition and ideological reasons. Other unions have engaged the strategy but emphasised the social aspects over the urgency of a green transition. There are good reasons for that when states, business and environmentalists focus on urgency without justice.

Overall, Just Transition is high on the agenda of the world of labour and there are many instances of unions debating and promoting Just Transition. These include the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, various British and US unions and union related initiatives, the Alberta Federation of Labour in Canada, South African trade unions, Australian unions (Snell 2020) and others. But while some unions from the Global South have engaged and debated it, particularly in South Africa, Just Transition still remains a predominantly Global North strategy (van Niekerk 2020; Alvarez Mullally et al. 2020). A global Just Transition agenda is a central challenge and opportunity for the world of labour and global union organisations can and are playing a key role. Several global union

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organisations have well-developed Just Transition agendas, including the ITUC, IndustriALL, ITF and PSI. The European Trade Union Confederation has been actively promoting Just Transition.

A (still) small number of labour unions now also play an important role in Just Transition policies. National Just Transition policies have been adopted in Canada (Mertins-Kirkwood and Hussey 2020) and Spain (see Sanz Lubeiro in this issue) while there is discussion whether the German coal transition is an example of Just Transition (Reitzenstein et al. 2020). At subnational level, Colorado is the first state in the US to adopt a Just Transition policy with respect to coal. Unions have played important roles at the local level as well, for example the LaTrobe Valley in Australia (Snell 2020).

Ensuring that urgently needed climate action is underpinned by principles of social and economic justice will therefore depend a lot on union power. The level of legal protection accorded workers' enabling rights (of freedom of association, collective bargaining and collective industrial action) has been historically pivotal to how the benefits of fundamental social, environmental, economic and industrial change are distributed. Just Transition policies that are not based on these rights are squarely outside of the spirit of the concept.

### Scope and Ambition of Just Transitions

Whether amongst unions or the broader Just Transition community, the centre of gravity remains energy, and especially coal. While Just Transition for coal workers and communities is pressing, Just Transition must also address other fossil fuels<sup>4</sup>. Broadening the scope of Just Transition to include the extraction and use of all fossil fuels is imperative if Just Transition is to address climate change. Moreover, Just Transition policies must not be limited to fossil fuels and their most apparent uses, extensive and critical as these are. They must address the full range of damaging practices in the ways we produce and consume. This calls for a broader vision of Just Transition that addresses the whole political economies, from the local to the global.

Just Transitions are also necessary with respect to renewables (see Signorelli in this issue). Renewable energy is central to green transition but the sector is dominated by large corporations who are subject to the same logic of capitalism as fossil fuel corporations. Green transitions are not automatically just because there are many more jobs in the green economy than workers (and communities) transitioning from fossil fuels. Just Transition strategies must be about the people affected, must temper and challenge the logic of the market, and must be part of the fabric of a socio-ecological welfare state that, amongst other, ensures that good climate jobs are open to all workers, regardless of gender or origin.

The proliferation of Just Transition policies demands that we examine their variability and ambition. Collaboration with business can provide some positive innovations within the parameters of a

more socially responsible capitalism but this is often not possible (Goods 2020). It is not likely to challenge the world political economy while its scope is limited to the workers of particular corporations, rather than workers as a broader category or class. Just Transition policies that manage local or national crises by externalising their costs are likely to breed resentment and discontent. We do not yet have Just Transition policies that implement profound regulation and reorganisation of capitalism (whether fossil fuel or renewable) even though there are national and global unions and labour networks that advocate such an approach. In light of deepening inequality, globally and within countries, the persistence of nativism, and the continuing attacks on the world of labour, Just Transition can serve as a core element of a global socio-ecological program of action for all those who value equality and nature.

Our effort in Just Transitions, as well as that of the JTRC, has been to reclaim the role of labour and working class environmentalism in creating and nurturing this proactive and promising concept since its inception. We have not done this by glossing over the challenges and obstacles involved. Rather, we hope that our work will contribute to debates and practices that are both pragmatic and visionary – the central elements of the strategy of Just Transition from its very inception.

References in brackets refer to chapters in our new edited volume: Morena, Krause and Stevis (eds). 2020. *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World*. London: Pluto Press

#### Further reading

- Hampton, Paul. 2015. *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity: Tackling Climate Change in a Neoliberal World*. New York: Routledge.
- Just Transition Centre, 2017. *Just Transition. A Report for the OECD*: <https://www.oecd.org/environment/cc/g20-climate/collapsecontents/Just-Transition-Centre-report-just-transition.pdf>
- Just Transition Research Collaborative. 2018. *Mapping Just Transition(s) to a Low-Carbon World*. Geneva: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, University of London Institute in Paris and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. <http://www.unrisd.org/jtrc-report2018>

#### Notes

- 1 Morena, Krause and Stevis (eds). 2020. *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World*. London: Pluto Press
- 2 Young, Jim. 1998. 'Just Transition: A New Approach to Jobs v. Environment'. *WorkingUSA*, 2(2): 42-48
- 3 Martin Murillo, Laura. 2012. 'From Sustainable Development to a Green and Fair Economy: Making the Environment a Trade Union Issue'. In Rätznel, N. and Uzzell, D. (2012) *Trade Unions in the Green Economy: Working for the Environment*, pp. 29-40. London: Routledge
- 4 Just Transition Centre, 2019. *Just Transition in Action: Union Experiences and Lessons from Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Nigeria, and Spain*: [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/191120\\_-\\_just\\_transition\\_case\\_studies.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/191120_-_just_transition_case_studies.pdf)

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