

# Fighting for the Future: A Just Transition in Intensive Livestock Production?

The global food system has a huge impact on the climate crisis amounting to over one-third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions

The planet is in crisis. Climate change is threatening the world and is affecting all workers. The global food system has a huge impact on the climate crisis, and globally is estimated to be responsible for over one-third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. The intensive production of meat and dairy is the most emissions intensive sector in agriculture and is responsible for 14.5 percent of emissions<sup>1</sup>. Emissions from manure, the production of animal feed, clearance of land, production and use of agrochemicals, and fossil fuels used across the supply chain, pollute the air and the water<sup>2</sup>.

Population growth, the growth of the middle class, and shifts to diets, alongside neoliberalism and globalisation have all increased demand for and consumption of livestock products globally. This has contributed to huge scaling up of climate damaging production methods, and an export-driven system of global food production. Financialisation across the industry has consolidated power in the hands of a small number of TNCs. These corporations prioritise profits at the expense of the climate and the rights and wellbeing of workers. Globally, 70 percent of emissions are the result of corporate activity<sup>3</sup>, but these corporates brandish their vast economic power to lobby governments and international institutions to liberalise trade and influence climate change policy<sup>4</sup>. Production of huge quantities of cheap food contribute to the global obesity crisis, agrochemical and pharmaceutical use threaten the health of workers, and the COVID-19 crisis has underlined the potential of our food system to facilitate global pandemics<sup>5</sup>.

The global food system is also negatively impacted by the climate crisis, causing loss of nature, biodiversity and arable land, water shortages and reduced yields<sup>6</sup>. This is devastating food production, threatening global food security and harming the human right to food which is hitting groups in situations of vulnerability hardest. Of the 690 million who face food insecurity right now, 60 percent are women and girls<sup>7</sup>. Millions are workers' who produce the world's food. But food scarcity is not the cause of food insecurity. The global food system is failing to deliver food security because the system is devastated by inequality of access and food waste.

## Why is the climate crisis a trade union issue?

The climate crisis is already destroying the livelihoods of millions of workers across the world.

The impacts are disproportionately felt by certain groups - agriculture and food production workers whose livelihoods are dependent on the climate, and groups in situations of vulnerability (women, migrants, youth, precarious and informal workers) who are overrepresented in the sector. These workers often face insecurity and discrimination at work, have weak rights and representation and are regarded as disposable by corporates.

The food system is maintained by workers whose labour is exploited in the name of economic growth. Workers in intensive livestock production face relentless drives to cut costs, which results in stagnating wages, undermining of rights, and insecure and dangerous working conditions. Workers also face unique occupational health and safety issues because of the changing climate. Workers who are exposed to the elements or working without ventilation or air conditioning experience heat stress, with potential deadly impacts<sup>8</sup>. It is estimated that 2.2 percent of working hours worldwide will be lost to high temperatures by 2030<sup>9</sup>, contributing to lost wages and more precarious working situations. Trade unions have a long history of fighting for a safer world where the rights of workers are protected. The climate crisis is no different.

## Principles for a Just Transition in Livestock Production

Intensive livestock production is unsustainable and is threatening global food security. But food systems are essential for tackling the climate crisis. A radical transformation of the food system is urgently needed. But shifts to production will bring challenges for workers' livelihoods and workers and unions have historically been excluded from decision-making about transitions.

But the climate crisis has ultimately been caused by the failure of the capitalist system to provide equality, respect for rights, and sustainability. So, for unions the fight for a just transition also means the fight for socio-economic transformation to address the root causes of the climate crisis. This means building worker power to confront global capital and a radical shift away from unequal and profit-driven systems of endless production and consumption towards more equal power and ownership relations and a more sustainable world. Although responsibility for transformation lies with

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governments and corporations with the most power, unions still have an essential role to make demands and take practical action at the local level.

- Workers and rural farmers who will be most affected by the transition must *have a voice in shaping the change* and redesigning the food system – through tripartite negotiations and workplace collective bargaining.
- Inevitably, the transition will affect livelihoods – jobs will change, and, in some industries, jobs will be lost. But workers should not bear the burden of the transition. This means that workers need guarantees for the *creation of new green jobs, social protection and labour policies* that will enable job creation and training. Workers also need *support and safety nets* to ensure that their livelihoods are safeguarded.
- Transformation cannot take place without proper investment and policy support from governments. Investment is needed to manage and facilitate the transition to promote new methods of production, and to provide education and training to reskill workers in new jobs and industries. Transformational strategies using public investment and policy have already been developed in North America and Europe, where activists have put forward proposals for a ‘Green New Deal’<sup>10</sup>.

Years of debt and structural adjustment programmes mean some lower-income countries may not have the infrastructure, social security, or welfare schemes able to support the transition. Many workers in the Global South are also in the informal economy without social protection. Countries in the Global South often suffer the worst impacts of the climate crisis, despite contributing the least. But historic exploitation of resources and agricultural dumping by countries in the Global North means that it should be up to the richest countries to help fund social protection programmes for lower-income countries. Debt cancellation should also take place, as well as provision of sustainable and equitable climate finance for countries in the Global South<sup>11</sup>.

## What is the alternative?

So, what do we transition to? There will be no ‘one size fits all’ solution. The alternative measures need to fit the local context and the needs of the sector. But in livestock production, agroecology has been put forward as an alternative sustainable practice. Agroecology frames the health of the planet and the fight for equality as connected. It promotes food production to take place in harmony with the climate and with people. In agriculture and livestock production this means shifting away from high-input artificial fertilisers and pesticides towards organic forms of food production, and the use of renewable energy, as well as greater equality and respect for human rights. For this reason, it is often linked with the concept of ‘food sovereignty’.

But livestock production is reliant on huge inputs which are not going to easily or quickly transform. So, unions will also have to fight for other types of transformation. This might include demands for *food production systems to be decentralised*. Not only can this help limit emissions from long supply chains, but it can also boost local economies and reduce the dependence of local farmers on big corporations. But this means the need for interventions to strengthen local food systems’ resilience, diversify economies away from exports and scale down harmful trade and investment agreements<sup>12</sup>.

Another key demand is for the *redistribution of power*. Power needs to be shifted away from corporates back to workers, local communities, and small farmers to give them agency over their land, food, and agricultural policies. This means adopting a rights-based approach to transformation, demanding respect for and protection of human rights, including trade union rights<sup>13</sup>, for groups in situations of vulnerability to have a voice in decision-making and for more regulation on the power of corporates. In many countries, industrial livestock production continues to be supported by climate-damaging public subsidies<sup>14</sup>. Subsidies also need to be redirected to support the transition to agroecology.

Building trade union power along the livestock supply chain is imperative for transforming the global food system. The fundamental demands of workers in the food system – for a living wage, stable employment, and a safe working environment – are central to this fight. Empowered unions should be at the forefront of shaping policies, programmes, and action plans to ensure change.

- 1 <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/>
- 2 <https://www.iatp.org/industrial-livestock>
- 3 <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change>
- 4 <https://www.iatp.org/milking-planet> and <https://www.iatp.org/documents/regulate-global-meat-and-dairy-companies-cut-methane-and-avoid-climate-breakdown>
- 5 This was also seen in the avian influenza see: <https://grain.org/en/article/556-bird-flu-crisis-small-farms-are-the-solution-not-the-problem>
- 6 <https://www.ipcc.ch/srcccl/chapter/chapter-5/>
- 7 <https://www.wfpusa.org/women-are-hungrier-infographic/>
- 8 <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/10/heat-human-rights-issue-21st-century/616693/>
- 9 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_711919.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_711919.pdf)
- 10 <https://www.greennewdealuk.org>
- 11 [https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/eurodad/pages/2516/attachments/original/1632470389/Climate\\_Debt\\_Statement.pdf?1632470389](https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/eurodad/pages/2516/attachments/original/1632470389/Climate_Debt_Statement.pdf?1632470389)
- 12 <https://grain.org/e/5639>
- 13 <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/introduction-to-international-labour-standards/conventions-and-recommendations/lang--en/index.htm>
- 14 <https://www.iatp.org/nature-based-solutions-livestock>

Corporations prioritise profits at the expense of the climate and the rights and wellbeing of workers, while globally 70 percent of emissions are the result of corporate activity

The International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) commissioned GLI Manchester to transform IUF research on the climate crisis in intensive livestock production into a guide to equip affiliated unions in meat, dairy, and agriculture sectors to influence the conditions for a just transition. This article is based on that guide.