

Ireland's workers fighting for a Just Transition

Commentators and politicians of every hue regularly comment on the need for a just transition for communities reliant on fossil fuel industries. Regrettably, with its adoption by the mainstream, the phrase seems to have lost a large degree of its potency. The idea initially appeared to challenge the concept of 'creative destruction', which has been core to the dynamism of capitalism¹. Typically, governments have not been pro-active or attempted to pre-empt the disruptive forces of capital.

In the past, de-industrialisation across Europe and North America not only condemned millions of workers who were employed in traditional industry to joblessness, it also made redundant their way of life.

The transition to a low-carbon economy in Ireland is currently replicating this experience for workers and communities who have been reliant on the fossil fuel industry particularly those in the midlands working in the peat industry and employed by related semi-state companies such as Bord na Mona.

While extraordinary sacrifices have been demanded of peat workers and the communities of the Midlands, this has not been matched by the required supports from government or state agencies, in a manner consistent with the principles of a Just Transition. Overall, the experience of the low carbon transition process in Ireland has been overwhelming negative.

To date, over 1000 jobs have been lost in this industry and there has been a signal failure to create new and replacement jobs and quality employment opportunities for the affected workers and communities, in a manner that would mitigate and offset the losses suffered.

This contrasts sharply with far more positive experience of transition for workers and communities in Spain, Germany and Australia, for example.

Until these deficits are addressed the entire transition process in Ireland risks becoming synonymous with job loss and lower living standards, with a resultant erosion of worker confidence and public support for much needed climate action.

Seeking a future for Ireland's Peat Workers

In the consciousness of the Irish public for many generations the peat industry otherwise known as turf has been the centre of rural life, energy generation and steady employment. The 'turning of turf' refers to the Irish practice of harvesting turf which has traditionally involved cutting sod from the bog, laying it out to dry and turning it periodically and then burning it for fuel, particularly in Ireland's power stations for electricity generation.

With the industry so interwoven within Irish life and our communities, the need of a just transition is vital to safeguard the future sustainability and development of rural communities in affected areas.

The concept of 'just transition' is not only pre-emptive, it also forces environmentalists to consider the social impact of rapid de-carbonisation on human communities. Prior to the mainstreaming of the concept there had been ill-considered calls by environmentalists for the immediate closure of the fossil fuel company Bord na Mona. There was a kind of public-shaming taking place by some commentators about the industries Bord na Mona had created or certainly that's how it was interpreted by people who lived and worked in the bog lands. At times the commentary seemed to be underpinned by deep-seated beliefs, conscious or otherwise, about backwardness and the bog in the Irish psyche. A subject which Minister Todd Andrews touched upon himself when establishing the Bord na Mona in 1946; 'the bog itself, in the Irish mind, was a symbol of barrenness and described the perception that anything to do with a bog spells inertia, ignorance and backwardness'.

The great success of Bord na Mona, of course, was that it broke the link between poverty and the bog. The creation of the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and Bord na Mona gave hope to the many impoverished small towns and villages throughout the midlands. During the 1940s there was a sense of a patriotic call to arms, as literally thousands of landless labourers flocked to the midlands, encouraged to save turf during the second world war due to the unavailability of coal. Many public figures of the day were enlisted to encourage workers to save the turf for the nation; Peadar O'Donnell was the recruiting agent for Mayo, for example.

The ESB and Bord na Mona improved the living standards of many thousands of workers and brought a sense of self-confidence to previously impoverished communities. Rural electrification brought prosperity and transformed life in provincial Ireland. For example the success of Offaly Gaelic football and hurling throughout the 1970s and up to the '90s was inextricably linked to the relative prosperity that Bord na Mona and the ESB brought to communities in villages and towns such as Ferbane, Rhode, Shannonbridge, Birr and Portarlinton and many more besides. The all-Ireland winning Offaly football team of 1971 had no less than eight ESB employees on the starting fifteen.

Bord na Mona has for decades been one of the key state enterprises in Ireland, supporting

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The transition process risks becoming synonymous with job loss and lower living standards, eroding worker confidence and public support for climate action

thousands of high-quality unionised jobs directly and thousands indirectly throughout the midlands. It is now in decline in its core business, as the bogs are being closed and no new ones are being harvested. In 2019, the ESB announced that it was halting the operation of peat burning power plants in Shannonbridge in county Offaly and Lanesboro country Longford in 2020 rather than initially planned in 2030 which sent shockwaves throughout midland communities which places the future of BNM's cored industry peat harvesting into short term rather than medium-term doubt.

SIPTU is at the forefront of the fight to create a viable post-peat production future for hundreds of union members and their local communities. In reality what we have are companies downsizing their operations without linking proposed closures and production reductions strategically with investment in new forms of employment nor engaging with its workforce and local communities in agreeing a plan for a just transition. As a consequence, the future for the small towns and villages throughout the midlands is uncertain. In some respects, Ireland's small towns are beginning to resemble the North of England's bleak post-industrial wastelands.

There are not many shining examples of cities or towns who have managed to re-invent themselves, where they had previously been singularly dependent on heavy industry and mining. What comes post industrialisation is typically poorly paid precarious service-industry type employment. If we do not make intelligent interventions in the market, then the natural tendency for market forces to concentrate wealth in ever decreasing hands will continue unabated and the relative wealth distributive effect that the semi-state sector provided in the past will not be a legacy that the next generation of Irish workers will inherit.

Just Transition Interventions

It must be acknowledged that there have been some government-led initiatives in the midlands to mitigate job losses resulting from the cessation of peat excavation more recently. A Just Commissioner was appointed in 2019. By the end of 2021 over €240 million in government funding had been allocated to various projects in the peatlands. However, to date very little has been gained by both workers and communities from these investments.

In July of 2021 Bord na Mona claimed that it would be back to pre-2018 levels of employment within 5 years. Yet, the reality behind the headline announcements is less impressive. Monies for retraining have only been made available to Bord na Mona workers still in employment with the company and not for those who have been made redundant. The Bord na Mona Group of Unions has consistently argued for all Bord na Mona workers to have access to retraining and upskilling grants. The public tendering process under the Just Transition fund has not been sufficiently weighted to support local enterprises and workers. A large Dublin-based

company won the tender to operate bike hire services at Lough Boora Park for example, replacing a locally based provider who had operated a bike hire company in the area over the previous decade. When the Midlands Regional Transition Team (MRTT) was originally established in 2018 there were no trade union representatives on the body. This has been subsequently rectified. And regrettably, the jobs associated with renewable energy technologies, wind for example, require very little labour once the initial turbines are installed.

The ESB and Bord na Mona's once dominant position in energy generation has declined with the liberalisation of electricity markets. The idea of the 'prosumer' has become popular in discussions about the future of electricity generation and use. Thus, the individual homeowner may simultaneously contribute to the national grid through small scale solar or wind electricity generation, while also consume electricity from the same grid when her/his needs exceed her/his generation capacity. At first glance this may seem a positive step in the democratisation of electricity generation, but in reality, it is more likely to lead to a type of energy apartheid, with citizens who have the means to install costly solar and wind energy technologies in their homes paying a fraction of the energy costs of less well-off citizens who will be solely dependent on the national grid. The reconstruction of electricity generation brought about by the climate crisis is a monumental challenge for unions organising in the energy sector. In many ways it is commensurate with the crisis the collapse in Fordist-type production in manufacturing presented to the wider trade union movement. While trade unions are likely to retain their dominant position in the supply side of the business, through ESB networks, their position in electricity generation is much more precarious.

It is worthy to note that the Irish government itself has committed to the implementation of a Just Transition by signing up to a range of global accords and treaties, most notably the 2015 Paris Agreement and the 2018 Silesia Declaration, both of which contain explicit undertakings on this issue. In addition, it signed the Just Transition pledge that emerged from COP 26, which explicitly commits to supporting and promoting social dialogue along with the creation of Decent Work, as part of the transition process. In March 2020 a report of Ireland's National Economic & Social Council (NESC) set out the essential blueprint for building a Just Transition in Ireland, and its key recommendations reflect a clear consensus on this issue across our society. In November 2021, national climate action plan was published by the Irish government which included an emphasis on a Just Transition. However, the overwhelming experience by unions, workers and their communities has been negative to date, so collectively we need to organise to move government from mere optics and turn these ambitious promises into real action.

Our task traditionally in the trade union movement was to extend popular sovereignty over the economy and deliver decent terms and conditions for workers. The semi-state model has historically been a very dynamic creation of our state that tried to marry the competing needs of economy and society. Regrettably, in recent times, a blind faith in market forces has tried to paint the semi-state sector as passé. Increasing semi-state companies are forced to impose purely market-based management decisions to the exclusion of all other social concerns.

State enterprise is unlikely to dominate in the sphere of electricity generation in the low carbon or post-carbon era to the extent that it did when fossil fuel was the principal source of our electricity supply, though it will likely continue to play some role. There are plans for joint ventures between Bord na Mona and the ESB for the development of large-scale solar parks on Bord na Mona sites across the midlands, for example. Also, the capital investment required for harnessing wave power off our coasts may be out of the reach of private enterprise, and citizens may well be uncomfortable with the effective privatisation of our oceans. Small scale wind turbines sites have, to date, been largely dominated by the private sector and have, at times, been fiercely resisted by local communities. The ownership model of these enterprises needs to be challenged. A model – similar to the cooperative-based water group schemes which play a significant role in the provision of water services for rural communities – could be promoted and supported by the state in respect of wind generation also. If the financial benefits of wind power were shared with communities, rather than the profits been exploited between the individual landowner and the private concern exclusively, rural communities would surely be more likely to embrace this new green technology. The trade union movement may have a limited role to play in such adventures, but it should be to the fore in promoting common ownership of electricity generation, even if the method of common ownership is not through state monopolistic control.

Building Alliances for a Just Transition

The debates about the future of Bord na Mona and by extension the midlands have brought into focus the complex relationship between the Left and Environmentalists. David Harvey writes on how socialism at times stoops to what he describes as ‘Promethean’ projects in which the domination of nature is presumed both possible and desirable². The construction of *Ard na Crusha* maybe a successful example of a such Promethean ambition. There is a tension between Left and Green where the certainty of scientific socialism clashes with the Romantic origins of environmentalism.

not only [do environmentalists] occupy almost every position on the traditional Left/Right ideological spectrum, but also [they] can adapt to diverse political positions while simultaneously claiming that they are beyond politics in the

normal sense. All ecological projects and arguments are simultaneously political-economic projects and arguments and vice versa³.

We, in the trade union movement, argue against a return to ‘nature’ and, like Harvey, argue that the second nature of our urban landscapes cannot be allowed to deteriorate or collapse without ecological disaster for our own species. This argument, of course, cannot be cynically used to block the urgent need for de-carbonisation or negate the enormous and immediate problems that global warming is visiting on the poorer parts of the world, but it needs to be listened to.

Engaging Left and Green traditions

The trade union movement can no longer fight to retain every job in existing carbon-producing industries; to do so would leave us complicit in the planet’s degradation. We, in the trade union movement, have been very late in the day in engaging with climate change. The ITUC pamphlet published in 2015, ‘There are no Jobs on a Dead planet’, however, was a game changer. It has engaged a critical mass of trade union activists in the cause of climate change. If we are to find a way through this existential crisis which is climate change, it will ultimately be via a dialectic engagement between Left and Green traditions. A synthesis of unions’ concerns for social and economic justice, married with environmentalists’ fears for the future of the planet, holds out the promise of a social movement greater than the sum of its existing parts.

In March 2022, a ‘Just Transition Alliance’ was launched to build a broad coalition across the trade union movement, environmental organisations and wider civil society to campaign for a transformative programme of a just transition to protect and create jobs, reduce emissions, enhance living standards and generate new opportunities that will help to build sustainable, resilient communities across the country.

As a matter of urgency, the alliance has called on the Irish government to establish a National Just Transition Commission based on social dialogue and charged with developing the national framework and blueprint for Just Transition covering the entire economy, in line with the ILO Guidelines for a Just Transition.

This collaboration is the most effective means of achieving and delivering this change by working together to ensure that all climate policy and action is framed and underpinned by the practice and principles of Just Transition.

But the trade unions can no longer fight to retain every job in carbon-producing industries

- 1 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, (London: Routledge, (1994) [1942]). pp. 82–83.
- 2 David Harvey, *The Ways of the World* (London: Profile Books, 2016), p. 162.
- 3 Robert C Paehlke, *Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 194. cited in David Harvey, *The Ways of the World* (London: Profile Books, 2016), p. 181.