



# TRADE UNIONS AND JUST TRANSITION

The Search for a Transformative Politics



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Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) is a global, multi-sector 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.



# Trade Unions and Just Transition

## The Search for a Transformative Politics

By Sean Sweeney and John Treat

In late 2015, after more than a decade of tenacious lobbying of government negotiators, union representatives led by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) succeeded in getting the phrase “Just Transition” into the preamble to the Paris Climate Agreement negotiated at COP21.<sup>1</sup> The text affirmed “the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities.”<sup>2</sup>

More than two years have passed since COP21, and calls for a Just Transition have emerged from all corners of the global progressive community. Once more or less exclusively a trade union priority, calls for a Just Transition increasingly appear, in varying forms, in the campaigns of major environmental organizations, climate justice and green NGOs, and indigenous and farmers’ movements. However unevenly, Just Transition has started to feature in discussions around national politics and policy, and unions increasingly refer to the current period as Just Transition’s “implementation phase.”

### Just Transition, Where Are You?

Given the growing interest in Just Transition among trade unions and their allies, and the different ways in which the term is used, it is timely to reflect on what Just Transition is, what it is not, and what it can and should become. This paper aims to make a contribution to that discussion.

As the call for a Just Transition has become both more urgent and more widespread, the pursuit of Just Transition initiatives and policies has intensified. This has taken various forms. For example, unions have tried to ensure that some of the revenues from emissions trading schemes be used to create “Just Transition Funds.”<sup>3</sup> Currently, unions in several countries are calling for regional and national governments to include mandates and provisions for Just Transition in climate legislation prompted by “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs), or simply “National Contributions,” that lie at the center of the Paris Agreement. In at least one instance, unions are calling for establishment of a “Just Transition Commission.”<sup>4</sup> In the US, robust Just Transition measures have been included in legislation introduced by Senator Bernie Sanders and others. In one known instance in South Africa, some unions have gone so far as to call for a national strike for Just Transition to protect the livelihoods of workers in coal-fired power stations, 40,000 of whom risk losing their jobs as a result of the national government’s policy to promote renewable energy via privatization.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these efforts, the search for actual examples of Just Transition at the workplace or policy level can be a frustrating undertaking. Scholarly and union-centered research thus far has produced some useful data in terms of workplace and community-based processes and outcomes.<sup>6</sup> However, these tend to be exceptions that merely draw attention to the rule—a rule marked by the distinctly *unjust* norms that have come to define “work” for the vast majority of the global working class. For



every example of progress towards Just Transition that seems at all plausible, there are countless others suggesting that things are moving in the opposite direction. Similarly, while there are instances of successful efforts to promote labor market or welfare protections for certain categories of workers, these are also strikingly exceptional. In some instances, union members have reacted with frustration or even anger when the phrase “just transition” is used, fully aware that, while the concept of Just Transition may be useful in theory, it is far removed from the harsh day-to-day realities facing workers in many parts of the world.

## Two Transitions: “Worker Focused” and Societal Shift

This paper will not attempt to collect and collate examples of Just Transition experiences; others have attempted to do so, with mixed results. Instead, we will consider what unions mean by Just Transition, how that meaning has changed over time, and how these different meanings have shaped strategic decision, especially in terms of approaching or selecting allies and partners.

It is important to note that the term Just Transition is currently used, sometimes quite loosely, to refer to very different kinds of transition. Most frequently, the term is used to highlight concerns about the likely impacts of climate and environmental policies on specific categories of workers (say, in a coal-fired power station that faces closure), or—in the case of the Paris Agreement—“the workforce” as a whole. In this paper, we will refer to this meaning of Just Transition as “worker-focused.”

Increasingly, however, the term “Just Transition” is used to describe a broader and deeper *socio-economic transformation*—a societal shift to a “a sustainable, low-carbon economy,” or “a zero carbon world” over a period of several decades. With this broader usage, it is acknowledged

that, in order to address climate instability and its consequences, serious social and economic changes will be necessary—changes that will need to be both *rapid* and *radical*, if there is to be any serious attempt both to *mitigate* the impact of emissions (to minimize further damage to the earth’s climate systems), and to help communities *adapt* to the consequences of warming that is already “locked in” (from emissions already released). This shift in usage reflects an increasingly clear and explicit recognition that *transitioning* to a sustainable future society will involve a deep *transformation* of the current one.

Union debates at the global level have not always paid close attention to the differences between these two very different meanings, and for this reason many trade unionists may not immediately appreciate the implications of these differences. While this is understandable to some degree, it is important to put these differences and their implications clearly in focus. By doing so, we can actually open the door to a broader and much-needed discussion about both the nature of the challenges the climate crisis poses for workers, and the role and capacity of organized labor and other social movements to help bring about the kinds of changes that are required to address them.

## The Need for an Integrated and Transformative Politics

Unions for the most part understand that they must strive to develop a Just Transition politics that somehow addresses the concerns of the here-and-now (worker-focused transitions) in ways that also keep the need for a transition of the entire economy in the forefront (socioeconomic transformation). This is because a transition that is “just” from the perspective of workers or “the workforce,” but which fails to advance or help achieve the needed socioeconomic transformation, will ultimately achieve little in the light of climate-related and broader ecological



concerns. Alternatively, policies aimed at driving a socioeconomic transformation that are (potentially) robust enough to achieve climate and environmental targets (such as those adopted in the Paris Agreement), but which ignore the impact on workers in specific locations or industries, risk being unable to secure the kind of social and political support from workers that such a transformation will need in order to be successful.

For the most part, unions have concerned themselves with the impact of climate policy on workers, whether “negative” (in terms of job losses in carbon-intensive or carbon-dependent sectors) or “positive” (in terms of “green jobs”). As representatives of tens of millions of members—and currently as the chief representatives of the working class—it has made perfect sense for unions to focus on bringing the voice and concerns of workers into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other multilateral spaces. In so doing, unions quickly and quite naturally moved beyond a narrow, “safety net,” worker-focused view of Just Transition, to lending their support to calls for the kinds of broader socioeconomic changes that will be needed to achieve a genuinely sustainable, low-carbon future. This shift is perfectly understandable and appropriate—but it demands deeper reflection, if its implications are to be fully understood, embraced, and decisively acted upon.

### “Social Power” or “Social Dialogue”?

We will argue in this paper that, in order to effectively pursue these connected demands—for worker-focused transition and for socioeconomic transformation—the international trade union movement must collectively formulate and then pursue a comprehensive, integrated approach.

For the ITUC, a broad socioeconomic transformation is recognized as urgently necessary.

However, as we explain below, by insisting on keeping “Social Dialogue” at the center of discussions about Just Transition, many unions working at the international level effectively endorse the main premises and perpetuate the main approach of the liberal business establishment, of UN agencies like UNEP, of mainstream, “big green” NGOs, and of market-focused think tanks and initiatives associated with figures like Nicholas Stern and Richard Branson. We will argue that, intentionally or not, this insistence holds trade union debates and priorities captive to a very narrow and demobilizing interpretation of Just Transition.

In the pages that follow, we make a trade union case for a different approach—one that can address worker-focused concerns while advancing the deeper socioeconomic transformation that is widely recognized to be necessary. In order to distinguish it from “Social Dialogue,” we call this the “Social Power” approach.

The need for such a different approach is grounded in several realities. Firstly, the commitment to an approach to a Just Transition grounded in Social Dialogue effectively involves an explicit (and non-negotiable) acceptance of restrictions on its pursuit—restrictions that are ideological in nature and cannot be justified in light of well-known history.

Secondly, when the nature of the required societal transformation is taken seriously, it clearly implies a deep restructuring of the global political economy. Social Dialogue is simply not equipped to help deliver such a transformation, because it rejects any serious challenge to current arrangements of power, ownership and profit, opting instead to draw comfort from uncritical endorsement of “win-win” solutions and “green growth” for all.

Thirdly, an alternative, “Social Power” approach is *already cohering* around a set of principles and premises drawn from both old and new



thinking about the causes and implications of the current socio-ecological crisis and how it can be addressed. This approach can be deployed perfectly well within established processes and institutions of Social Dialogue, but it also seeks to push trade unionism into a more consciously radical and hopeful space. We believe this emerging “Social Power” approach is already in the ascendancy across the trade union movement, and is increasingly finding common cause with, and being reinforced by, the energy and creativity of major social movements that share similar perspectives and goals.

### **The Transition Is NOT “Inevitable”— In Fact, It’s Not Even Happening**

Here it is important to draw attention to one of the most important differences between the Social Dialogue approach and the emerging Social Power approach. In keeping with the dominant “green growth” policy discourse of the past 10 or 15 years, proponents of Social Dialogue have often talked and acted as if the success of the transition depends merely on sufficient “political will” or “ambition.” On other occasions, it is either stated or implied that the transition to a low-carbon economy is “inevitable,” or even “well under way.”<sup>7</sup> But there is seldom any explanation offered for the lack of ambition and political will that has characterized almost twenty years of negotiations at the global level, and frequently at national and regional levels as well. Statements that suggest the transition is “inevitable” are especially remarkable given that, if anything, key trends are going in the opposite direction: more fossil fuels are entering the global energy system, more pollution and more emissions are being released, climate instability is increasing, and the degradation of ecosystems is accelerating. The approach to Just Transition articulated in this paper takes the view that the transition to a low carbon economy is emphatically *not* inevitable; in fact, without a radical restructuring

of the global political economy, it is extremely unlikely to occur.

Why, then, does the idea persist that the transition to a low-carbon economy is “inevitable”? For some unions, an important reason may be the idea’s ideological content: by supporting the “green growth” agenda, certain unions can stay on familiar territory, and in so doing hope to breathe new life into the Social Dialogue narrative. On this view, a redoubled effort to get the “social partners” to commit to Social Dialogue can set in motion a new phase of (“managed”) capital accumulation—so-called “*inclusive* green growth.”

As we document below, this largely uncritical approach to the dominant “green growth” agenda is increasingly being called into question, as is the capacity of the mechanisms of Social Dialogue to protect—let alone advance—the interests of workers, either in the near or longer term.

### **Broadening and Deepening the Just Transition Debate**

But pointing to the limitations of Social Dialogue and its association with the faltering “green growth” approach does not alone generate an effective alternative. Developing such an alternative is the collective responsibility of the international trade union community and its allies.

The effort to develop and articulate a bold and expansive “economy-wide” vision of what is possible and necessary for a Just Transition—a vision that integrates immediate worker concerns with the drive for a broader and deeper socioeconomic transformation—can inject fresh urgency into debates both within the international trade union movement, and between unions and their allies in other social movements.



In this way, the pursuit of a Just Transition could also serve as an energizing focal point for organizing and mobilizing, both inside the formal trade union movement and beyond it, to a wide range of crucial allies and broader social forces. The arguments presented here are intended to make a positive contribution to that vitally important task.

### **Just Transition and the Global South**

It is also necessary at the outset to explain why this paper focuses so heavily on debates around Just Transition in the global North, and Europe in particular. Simply put, the perspectives of trade union organizations centered in the global North continue to frame many of the most important debates within the global trade union movement, including debates around Just Transition. As we will show at length, the dominant narrative regarding Just Transition continues to be framed within—and constrained by—the experience of the post-WWII European context, and this is impeding a necessary and urgent consideration of how the international trade union movement can and must organize and orient itself in order to advance the interests of the global South, as well as workers and others in the global North.

In the concluding section, we will return to offer some reflections on how the struggle for Just Transition in the global South may best be advanced within the international trade union movement. We hope that in doing so, we will have made a worthwhile contribution towards clearing away some of the persistent distractions and diversions from this important task.

### **Goals and Structure**

This paper has four goals. The first goal is to help unions and their allies who may be new to the Just Transition debate understand its polit-

ical background and evolution, particularly in the context of the UNFCCC.

The second goal is to situate debates on Just Transition with respect to what actually needs to be done to reduce emissions to the levels considered necessary by the scientific consensus and reflected, however imperfectly, in the Paris Agreement. The changes necessary to achieve this transformation are dramatic, and will affect virtually every aspect of life.

The third goal is to trace the history of the “Social Dialogue” approach to Just Transition, and to situate this in its political context, in order to provide unions with a clearer understanding of its potential and its limitations for advancing workers’ rights and protections, and for guiding debate and action on Just Transition.

The fourth goal of the paper is to document the relatively recent emergence of a more radical trade union approach to Just Transition, which for convenience we will call the Social Power approach. As we explain below, Social Power is not presented as an “either/or” alternative to the practice of Social Dialogue. While the latter has the potential to produce more positive outcomes, unions will continue to make the best of what is available. But many unions realize that a more diverse and audacious approach is needed—one built around a transformative agenda.

The Social Power approach is guided by the belief that a Just Transition cannot be accomplished without a deep restructuring of the global political economy. It is guided by the belief that current power relations must be challenged and changed. If this does not occur, then the vast majority of the world’s working people will never see anything vaguely resembling a Just Transition.

The enormity of this task, combined with the unimaginable consequences of failure, must define the political goals that unions and their



allies embrace and pursue. This does not entail neglecting workers' existing concerns and struggles, but it does require that those struggles be integrated into a transformative politics anchored in the expansion of democratic control over key economic sectors, the re-assertion of a robust understanding of the public good, and an ambitious, movement-building approach.

These goals are approached across four sections. In Part One, we will provide a brief summary of the history of Just Transition as a trade union demand. This will include a concise account of the effort waged by unions to incorporate Just Transition into what would become the Paris Agreement, but which for a number of years was referred to as the "post-Kyoto Agreement." This agreement was expected to emerge from COP15 in Copenhagen in late 2009, but the talks produced the "Copenhagen Accord" and paved the way for a voluntary non-binding agreement that was adopted in Paris at the end of 2015 and ratified in 2016.

In Part Two, we discuss the broad dimensions of the transition that is needed and, importantly, how little progress has been made so far. In fact, the reverse is true: the transition becomes more elusive and more formidable with each passing year. Emissions and pollution levels continue to rise, energy consumption remains on an upward path, and temperature thresholds grow closer and closer to being breached. This argument has been made in other TUED

## Part One: The Road to Paris

In Part One, we provide a brief summary of the history of Just Transition as a trade union demand, focusing on the effort waged by unions to incorporate Just Transition into what was to become the Paris Agreement on climate change.

working papers, and therefore only a brief summary will be presented here. As ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow recently expressed it, "We understand that the sectorial and economic transformation that faces us [is] the fastest and deepest we have faced at any time in our history and with a faster time frame."<sup>8</sup>

In Part Three, we discuss the Social Dialogue approach to Just Transition that is currently promoted by the ITUC, the ITUC's Just Transition Center (JTC), and the ILO. We explore the assumptions that anchor the Social Dialogue approach, and how the politics of Social Dialogue have changed over the past several decades in the wake of the unrelenting and systematic attacks on unions' very existence, which flow from the ongoing neoliberal push to further liberalize, privatize, and deregulate the economy.

In Part Four, we discuss the emergence of a Social Power approach to Just Transition. We intentionally use the term Social Power in a provisional and flexible manner, in part because few in the trade union movement would dispute the fact that unions need more social power, and some are confident that social dialogue is a form of social power. We argue, however, that an important means of achieving more social power is to fight for solutions to the social and ecological crisis that are commensurate to the severity of that crisis, and that this will entail the expansion of public ownership of key economic sectors and institutions.

This history is important because it reveals the commitment shown by unions to Just Transition over the course of more than a decade, as well as the effort expended by government representatives to keep any reference to workers or the workforce out of the negotiating text.





But this account also shows how Just Transition evolved from a specific, worker-focused “safety net” provision to the point where it becomes intertwined with a broader, “green growth” and jobs-focused agenda. This narrative frames the (allegedly inevitable) transition as one that will create plenty of jobs, generate perpetual “inclusive” growth, and anchor a utopian vision of “sustainable development.” On this view, the transition would usher in a new form of “managed capitalism,” where governments would administer robust “polluter pays” measures and offer incentives to the emerging green business community. For many unions, this vision offered the hope of breathing new life into Social Dialogue, Social Partnership, and “Tripartism.” We return to discuss the significance of this in more depth in Part Three below.

### **Tony Mazzocchi and the Origins of Just Transition**

The term Just Transition has roots in the US labor movement—specifically, in the efforts of the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW; now part of the United Steelworkers) to negotiate a “Superfund for Workers” when the 14,000-acre (5,670 hectare) Ciba-Geigy chemical facility in New Jersey was closed down in the mid-1980s after its toxic footprint attracted opposition from environmental groups and government officials. More than merely income protection for the plant’s 650 workers, the union also sought a program of government-funded retraining for those displaced by the closure.

OCAW President Anthony “Tony” Mazzocchi used the term Just Transition to capture the basic idea that if workers’ jobs were threatened by policy changes—for environmental protection or disarmament, for instance—those workers should be protected from, or compensated for, any negative consequences. If the Just Transition concept were ever turned into binding

agreements or policy, Mazzocchi argued, then workers and their unions would be willing to embrace rather than resist changes of this nature. Before “green jobs” became a widely used term, Mazzocchi argued that environmental protection could create jobs—and these new jobs could become part of a broader societal approach to Just Transition. In 1997, OCAW adopted a resolution explicitly calling for a “Just Transition.” Three years later, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)—to which OCAW was affiliated—adopted an entire program of action on the subject.

It is important to note that Mazzocchi saw Just Transition not simply as a “safety net” provision, but as a means of raising larger questions about economic decisions and priorities, in order to help workers imagine a different future; he also saw trade unionism as a social movement that should stand on clear principles. Mazzocchi was often attacked by other union leaders for his anti-war politics and his criticism of the oil and nuclear industries (among other things). In his words:

*I have been accused of being a militant. I think that's a sad reflection of where we are. I thought we would wear proudly the fact that we are militant. I don't intend to bow before any... unjust company, unjust government or tyranny in any form; that's my role to the last breath of my life. That's what trade unionism is all about.<sup>9</sup>*

### **The International Trade Union Movement Adopts Just Transition**

Since its launch in 2006, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has taken the lead in framing global labor’s approach to climate protection and environmental issues more broadly. Prior to that, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) had been the principal body of the global trade union movement since the early 1990s and the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.



During the 1990s, unions at the international level began to adopt and use the term Just Transition in the context of UN meetings around the Commission on Sustainable Development (or CSD, formed after the 1992 Rio Conference or “Earth Summit”) and also the annual climate change meetings of the UNFCCC’s “Conference of the Parties” (“COP”) that began in 1995.

In June 2010, at its second World Congress, the ITUC adopted an important resolution on “combating climate change through sustainable development and just transition.”<sup>10</sup> The ITUC reasserted the need for a Just Transition at its third World Congress in Berlin in 2014.<sup>11</sup> As of this writing, Just Transition seems likely to play an even larger role at the ITUC’s 2018 World Congress. Just Transition today is clearly at the center of the international trade union movement’s environmental and climate agenda.<sup>12</sup>

## The UNFCCC

Despite the growing interest and concern within official trade union spaces, the term “Just Transition” struck only a faint chord in global discussions around climate change at the UNFCCC during the 1990s, and only gradually came to be accepted as a key part of the vocabulary of the negotiations.

The establishment of the UNFCCC in 1992 led to the creation of a political architecture at the global level to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (the main one being CO<sub>2</sub>) at a level that would prevent “dangerous interference” with the climate system. In 1995, the first Conference of the Parties (or COP1) met in Berlin—the “parties” being signatory governments to the UNFCCC. After intense negotiations two years later at COP3, held in Kyoto, delegates agreed on a protocol that committed developed countries to achieve quantified targets for decreasing their emissions

of greenhouse gases. These richer countries, known under the UNFCCC as “Annex 1 Parties,” committed themselves to reducing their collective emissions by at least 5.2% below 1990 levels by 2012.

At COP4 in Buenos Aires in 1998, the ICFTU, along with the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD, issued a statement calling for more attention to be paid to both the positive and the negative effects on employment of different emissions reduction scenarios. The statement also noted that the success of such strategies would depend on the engagement of workers, unions, and employers in achieving agreed targets at workplaces, and in promoting political support for other measures within their communities around the world. For this partnership to materialize, the argument went, workers must feel confident that their livelihoods are not jeopardized. Unions therefore began to articulate the need for Just Transition policies to deal with the negative impacts on employment brought about by climate policies, and to highlight the need for income protection, re-employment opportunities, education, and re-training—all within a framework of Social Dialogue at all levels. It was argued that such policies would reduce worker resistance to climate protection policies and also help ensure worker and union engagement and cooperation.

At COP12 in Nairobi in 2006, unions emphasized the role of workplace-level emissions-reduction initiatives, including joint union-management “target-setting, monitoring, record-keeping, and implementation,” in conjunction with collective agreements and other special partnership arrangements.

## Green Growth, Green Jobs

In 2007, the discourse around Just Transition began to expand beyond “safety net” consider-



ations to include discussion of job creation opportunities during the transition to a low-carbon economy—so called “green jobs.” That same year, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) commissioned its own study exploring how jobs could be created by climate protection policies, and how vocational training and skills-building were important dimensions of a transition towards a low-carbon EU economy. The report concluded that, overall, employment benefits would accrue as a result of climate protection policies.

At COP13 in Bali that year, jobs remained central to the trade union message, but the overall framing increasingly made reference to the need for a societal transformation—one consistent with the emissions-reductions targets and timetables put forward by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its Fourth Assessment Report (AR4). The timetables were typically complex, as were the various mitigation scenarios that accompanied them, but the main message from AR4 was that global emissions should peak no later than 2015, and then fall steadily every year until 2050. The ITUC acknowledged the AR4 targets and consistently endorsed the IPCC’s recommendations in the ensuing years.

During this period, the ITUC partnered with UNEP and the ILO to promote a jobs-focused version of “green growth.” This involved the preparation and release, in September 2008, of the first-ever study of green jobs with both a sector-by-sector and a global focus.<sup>13</sup> Just Transition was now being described as “a means to bring economic life into a democratic and sustainable framework, one grounded in meaningful social dialogue and driven by broadly shared economic and social priorities.” Just Transition would help establish “a new mode of production and consumption that allows for greater social inclusion, equity, and opportunity.” In order for this to be achieved, “social dialogue is critically important both to ease

some of the tensions between business, trade unions, and civil society around the coming transition, and to frame the issues in ways that can help realize the many mutually beneficial features of a green and sustainable future.”<sup>14</sup>

At COP14 in Poznan the following year—with the global financial crisis in full swing—unions reinforced the green-growth message and promoted a “green jobs strategy,” while emphasizing the need for trade unions and civil society to be involved at all levels of decision-making.

In December 2015—despite the efforts in the years preceding, and despite the high hopes and determination of many in the labor movement—the adoption at COP15 of the six-page “Copenhagen Accord” amounted to a serious setback both for Just Transition, and for the prospects of a science-based and legally binding global climate agreement. Nevertheless, just one year later, at COP16 in Cancun, the ITUC was successful in securing a reference to Just Transition in the final declaration, affirming the importance of a “Just Transition which will create decent work, good quality jobs in the transition towards a low emission and climate-resilient society.” The inclusion of this language triggered much celebration among the unions present.<sup>15</sup>

At this stage, the effort to include Just Transition in the new global climate deal was gaining momentum, even if the deal itself was likely to be based on voluntary “pledge and review” commitments. At COP17 in Durban in 2011, ITUC argued that more aggressive emissions reductions would lead to greater numbers of jobs being created:

*The potential for job creation and transformation arising from an annual 2% GDP “green” investment in each country is huge, and could help building public support for climate action. At the UNFCCC level, this goes in line with the “operationalisation” of the Just Transition framework adopted in Cancun.*<sup>16</sup>



At COP19 in Warsaw in late 2013, the UN provided a draft outline of the structure of its future climate change agreement, where only “pure” climate issues were mentioned. As the ITUC observed, this accorded “no space for including issues such as Just Transition and Decent Work that were secured under the Cancun agreements. This puts our strategy in a difficult situation.”<sup>17</sup> At COP20 in Lima, the primary task was to ensure that, with the pivotal COP21 in Paris fast approaching, Just Transition made it back into the text. The effort was not successful. As the ITUC noted:

*Despite numerous governments raising the importance of including a message for the world’s workers around the need for decent work and just transition, co-chairs have ignored these demands, raising questions about who actually leads this process.... We will not let up on any government that denies the centrality of securing a just transition with decent work opportunities for workers when building climate plans—nor will we sit back and watch governments sell out future generations with their lack of courage.*<sup>18</sup>

As one union delegate commented, “At each COP, with intense effort, trade unions have generally succeeded in getting a paragraph or two on decent work, greener jobs, and Just Transition in the text. Then, when the next Conference of the Parties arrives, our text has been deleted and we must fight for it to be re-inserted.”<sup>19</sup>

## Arriving to Paris

For COP21 in Paris, the trade unions sent their largest delegation ever. Consisting of more than 400 trade unionists, the effort was the culmination of scores of lobbying initiatives at the national level in the months leading up to the December 2015 talks. After an intense two weeks of negotiations, unions had something to celebrate. The preamble to the draft agreement read:

*Taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities... [and]...*

*Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity*

The ITUC had hoped that the reference to decent work and a Just Transition would have been part of the “actionable” parts of the agreement, but this was not to be. The ITUC subsequently stated, “We face the biggest and most rapid industrial transformation in history. While a just transition for workers and the respect of human rights have been included in the preamble, too many Governments refused to commit to it in the operational sections.” The mention of Just Transition in the preamble was described as a “first step on which we will build.”<sup>20</sup>

In the two COPs following Paris, the ITUC turned its attention towards developing national-level implementation strategies (“a national plan for decarbonisation, clean energy and jobs”) and encouraged national trade union centers to direct their attention towards urging their own governments to act on Just Transition. Furthermore, “Governments and employers, with workers and their unions, must sit together and commit to protect our future through a just transition strategy.”<sup>21</sup>

## Implementation

Having Just Transition mentioned in the preface was a real accomplishment for the ITUC,



and unions operating at the global level consider their primary job to be helping to ensure that Just Transition becomes a real force at the level of national politics and company-level negotiations. As for the societal transition, the ITUC sees the role of unions as helping to ensure that the transition is both fair to workers and

sufficiently ambitious to fulfill the job-creation potential of a low-carbon future.

In Part Two, we highlight what needs to be done from a scientific standpoint—and why a transformative Just Transition politics is absolutely essential.

## Part Two: The “Net-Zero” Challenge

As unions embark on their efforts to implement Just Transition, it is important to be as clear as possible about the nature and scale of the challenge, and to confront the fact that addressing it will require a societal shift of revolutionary proportions—something that is explicitly recognized even by very “mainstream” voices. The debate on Just Transition needs to be anchored in this unavoidable reality.

Of course, a Just Transition is required in order to address a broad range of socio-ecological threats and challenges, but it is the emissions challenge that is perhaps the most formidable, and it is one that has been explored in exceptional detail and described with considerable rigor by the scientific community in recent years. Informed by that scientific foundation, the targets adopted in Paris expressed a global commitment to limit the increase in global average temperature to “well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and to work towards limiting warming to 1.5°C. Those commitments also recognized that achieving such warming targets requires that the world reach a state of “net-zero emissions” soon after 2050.

### The “50 Billion MT” Economy

But how can “net-zero emissions” be achieved? Today’s global economy generates nearly 50

billion metric tons (MT) of GHG emissions annually (nearly 55 billion if we include emissions due to changes in land use).<sup>22</sup> Power generation and industry combined generate nearly 37 billion MT of CO<sub>2</sub> alone.<sup>23</sup> And the global economy is expected to be three times larger in 2050 than it was in 2015.<sup>24</sup>

Achieving net-zero emissions will require full decarbonization of the global economy in just four or five decades. At that point, any further GHGs released into the atmosphere must somehow be offset, whether these are produced in order to generate electricity, make products, power cars, trucks, ships, and airplanes, heat and cool buildings, produce food, or any other processes on which organized, modern existence depends. In the case of CO<sub>2</sub>, offsetting such emissions can be done, at least to some extent, by enhancing photosynthesis through reforestation and expanding the amount of vegetation on the surface of the planet. However, at present, some forty-six to fifty-eight thousand square miles of forest are lost each year—equivalent to forty-eight football fields every minute.<sup>25</sup>

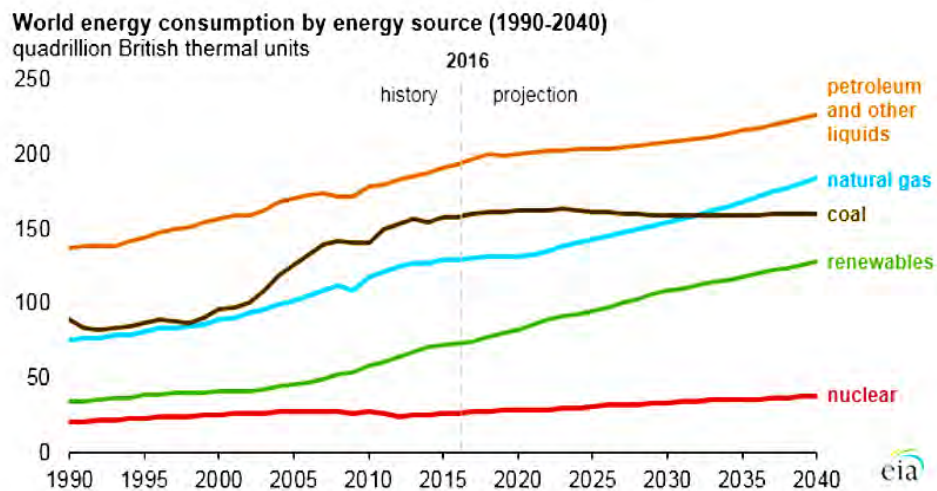
It is vital to realize that the need to reduce emissions quickly and dramatically runs counter to existing trends and anticipate trajectories. Emissions from fossil fuel use have risen a staggering 61 percent in the period

1990 to 2014, and are projected to continue to rise for at least another decade, if not two—far beyond what is compatible with even the less ambitious “well below 2 degrees Celsius” target.<sup>26</sup> While global emissions leveled off from 2014-2016—creating a lot of excitement about the prospect of “turning the corner”—they rose again by 2% in 2017, and are expected to rise again in 2018.<sup>27</sup> As the IPCC starkly observes, the levels of warming that are expected to accompany rising emissions on the basis of existing commitments “result in global mean surface temperature increas-

es in 2100 from 3.7 °C to 4.8 °C compared to pre-industrial levels.”<sup>28</sup>

### “Revolutionary Changes” in Energy

Energy makes the largest contribution to global GHG emissions through the burning of coal, oil, and gas. Even prior to the Paris talks, IEA’s then-Executive Director Maria van der Hoeven asserted, “Keeping temperature increase below 2°C will require revolutionary changes [to the global energy system].”<sup>29</sup>



Source: EIA, *International Energy Outlook 2017*

However, in its latest “World Energy Outlook” (2017), the International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that world energy demand will increase 30% by 2040.<sup>30</sup> The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) projects a 28% increase.<sup>31</sup> More recent projections by consulting firm McKinsey (in December 2017) project a rise in overall global energy demand of 26% from 2015 to 2050.<sup>32</sup>

The anticipated growth in the use of energy means that, among many other things, an enormous amount of new renewable power generation capacity must be brought online

in the coming few decades in order to counter the ongoing expansion of fossil fuels and the upward pressure on emissions. As we have noted in recent TUED working papers, the current rate of renewable energy deployment is not nearly sufficient to make this happen, and there is compelling evidence to suggest that it will never be sufficient, if the private sector and market forces are left to play a central role. As one source notes, “Despite a record installation of 161 GW of renewable generating capacity in 2016, global fossil fuel use continues to rise.”<sup>33</sup> This is because global energy demand is rising even faster than the deploy-

ment of renewables, so that *both* fossil fuels *and* renewables are expanding together. This has been the pattern in recent years, and it is almost certain to continue under the current policy framework and political economy. As a result, more than a decade after the *Stern Review* warned in 2006 that massive economic disruption would ensue if climate change was not addressed, emissions continue to increase, and are expected to do so beyond 2030.

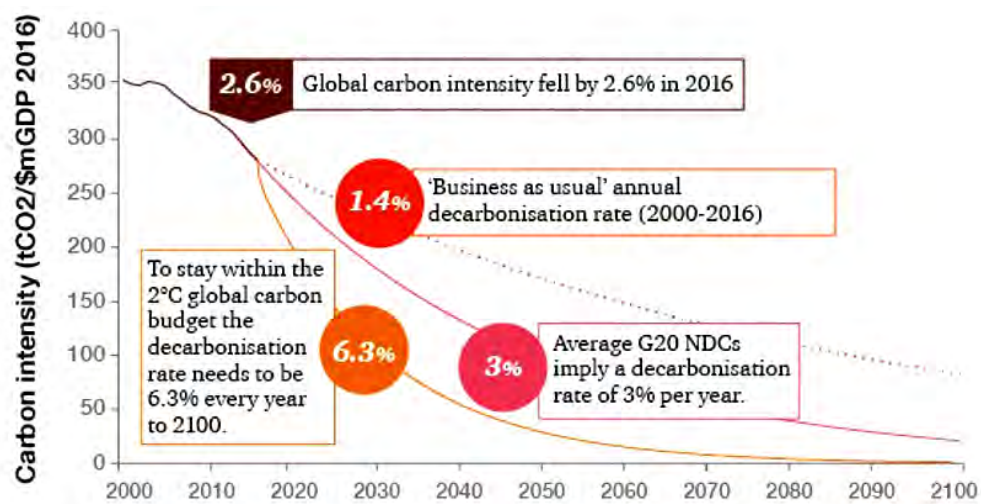
### Carbon Intensity

It is also important to keep in mind that, according to the mainstream scenarios, achieving the Paris targets involves major advances in areas beyond power generation: in building efficiency, heating and cooling, transportation, industrial processes and much more besides. In the case of industrial processes, technologies that are not yet commercially available (such as “carbon capture and sequestration,” or CCS) have been factored into decarbonization scenarios as making a major contribution. In the IEA’s “Beyond 2 Degrees Scenario,” the contribution of these technologies is as much

as 36% of the projected reductions of cumulative direct CO2 emissions.<sup>34</sup>

One common measure of progress towards an economy-wide decarbonization is “carbon intensity”: the amount of carbon released during productive activity for each unit of economic value produced (so gains in energy efficiency mean that carbon intensity falls). In 2012, consulting firm PwC estimated that in order to limit average overall warming to within 2°C, global carbon intensity would have to drop by 5.1% every year until 2050 and starting immediately.<sup>35</sup> In the years since, carbon intensity has not fallen at a rate anywhere near that. There has been some improvement—from an average of less than 1% to a high of 2.8% in 2015—but progress has stalled, and fell back to 2.6% in 2016. Given the necessity of such dramatic and unprecedented reductions in carbon intensity, which would have to be sustained over nearly four decades, PwC’s report deemed governments’ ambitions to limit warming to 2°C “highly unrealistic,” concluding that “[t]he only way to avoid the pessimistic scenarios will be radical transformations in the ways the global economy currently functions.”<sup>36</sup>

#### Decarbonization pathways



Source: PwC, *Is Paris Possible? The Low Carbon Economy Index 2017*

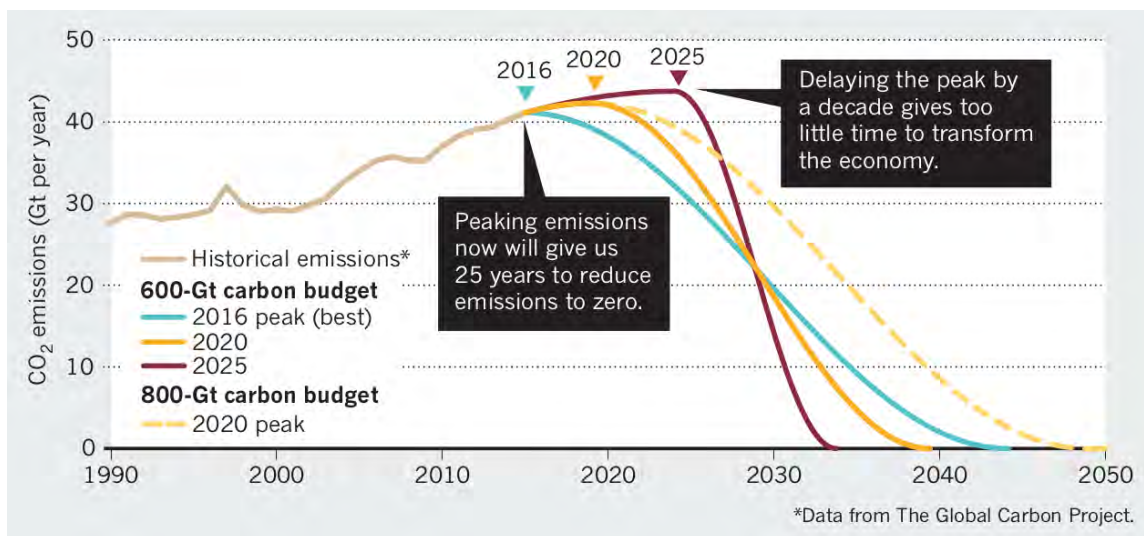
According to PwC’s 2017 report, the required annual rate of decarbonization *from now on* has increased to 6.3% per year, every year, until 2100.<sup>37</sup> And, of course, for each additional year in which decarbonization rates fall short of the new, higher requirement (and they are currently less than half), the reductions necessary from that point forward become even steeper. To translate this into the terms of a familiar metaphor, although the rate at which we are digging has slowed, we are still digging ourselves ever more deeply into a hole—and in 2016, after digging more slowly for a couple of years, we started digging a bit faster again.

The IEA’s *Energy Technology Perspectives* (ETP) is another important source of data and a key reference point.<sup>38</sup> In its latest ETP (2017), the IEA reports that only 3 of 26 sectors and technology areas are “on track” to meet their projected contribution to decarbonization: electric vehicles, energy storage, and “solar PV and onshore wind” (which the report takes together).<sup>39</sup> Even these three areas, the IEA notes, will require “sustained deployment and policies”

to remain on track. Of the remaining 23 areas, 15 have shown “improvement, but [with] more efforts needed,” while the remaining 8 are simply “not on track.” Two of the fifteen areas that have shown “improvement” but are not yet “on track” are natural gas-fired power generation and nuclear power generation. Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCS)—whether of fossil fuels or bio-energy (discussed in more detail below)—is among those that are simply “not on track.”<sup>40</sup>

Another scenario for reaching the 2°C target has recently been proposed by “Mission 2020,” a group of scientists working with Christiana Figueres, former head of the UNFCCC, with the aim of accelerating the global conversation about climate. The group has proposed that policymakers adopt a “carbon law” according to which emissions are cut roughly in half during each of the next three decades, beginning in 2020.<sup>41</sup> This would involve dramatic cuts, unlike anything ever undertaken or achieved, and delaying their onset by just a few years would mean dramatically steeper cuts from then on.

**Total CO2 emissions reduction requirements to remain within 2°C warming**



Source: Figueres et al., “Three years to safeguard our climate,” *Nature*, Vol. 546, pp. 593-595, June 29, 2017





## 2°C or 1.5°C?

As daunting as these scenarios are, they are in fact often based on limiting overall average warming only to the less ambitious and more dangerous target of 2°C, rather than to 1.5°C. While this half-degree difference in overall warming may seem small, there is a broad and growing scientific understanding that its significance in terms of the likelihood and severity of serious climate impacts is profound.<sup>42</sup>

At the time of COP21 in Paris, little detailed analysis had been done on what would be required to limit overall warming to the more restrictive 1.5°C target.<sup>43</sup> In order to fill that gap in knowledge, the UNFCCC asked the IPCC to produce a report focusing on both the impacts of 1.5°C warming and the emissions pathways that would be necessary to limit warming to that level. The report is expected in October 2018.<sup>44</sup> According to a draft of the report released in early 2018, achieving the 1.5°C target is still possible, but “extremely unlikely” without taking immediate action to reduce emissions, beginning to reduce demand for energy, and aggressively pursuing “negative emissions technologies” (discussed below).<sup>45</sup>

Following the Paris talks, the IEA also developed a new “Beyond Two Degrees” scenario (B2DS; mentioned briefly above) for its *Energy Technology Perspectives* reports, beginning in 2017. While still assuming a compound average annual economic growth rate of nearly 3% for the period until 2060, the B2DS describes a pathway to achieve net-zero emissions by 2060, based on pushing technology improvements and deployment “to their maximum practicable limits across the energy system.”<sup>46</sup> But even with this push to “maximum practicable limits,” the B2DS only manages to limit overall warming to 1.75°C by 2100. And doing so “implies that all available policy levers are activated throughout the outlook period in every sector worldwide. This would require un-

precedented policy action as well as effort and engagement from all stakeholders.”<sup>47</sup>

## Controversial Technologies and “Negative Emissions”

It is important to note that emissions reduction scenarios aiming at two degrees warming or less rely significantly on technologies that are controversial and / or unproven. The IEA noted in its ETP 2017 that, reaching net-zero CO2 emissions by 2060 for the global power sector alone would require, among many other things, achieving 74% of generation from renewables—including 2% from the completely unproven “bio-energy with CCS” (BECCS)—plus 7% from fossil fuels with CCS and 15% from nuclear power, both of which are highly controversial to say the least.<sup>48</sup>

On CCS in particular, a previous TUED working paper looked in detail at this technology as applied coal-fired power generation. The paper documented how, globally, the number of CCS pilot projects has fallen dramatically as a result of escalating costs and limited private sector interest. Overall the prospects for CCS for both the power sector and industrial processes remain extremely poor. These “capture” technologies remain economically unviable at commercial scale, and have often been used as political cover for the development of new (“CCS compatible”) coal infrastructure. The idea that new power stations can be retrofitted with CCS technologies when they are eventually developed (which is unlikely) creates a serious risk of “locking in” carbon-intensive infrastructure without providing the necessary (and promised) mitigation. If CCS technologies *were* deployed at the levels needed to significantly reduce emissions, the upstream environmental damage done by extracting, transporting, and burning coal would continue and likely increase due to the fact that the CCS requires as much as 20% more fuel input per unit of energy produced.<sup>49</sup>



Of course, as noted above, CCS is one of the technologies that is simply deemed “not on track” by the IEA and, given the many challenges it faces, CCS seems extremely unlikely to get “on track” any time soon.

While both nuclear generation and CCS have long been considered “essential mitigation technologies” in the mainstream discourse, this is not true in the case of “bio-energy with CCS” (BECCS). Unlike nuclear generation or CCS for fossil fuels, BECCS moves into the realm of “negative emissions technologies,” which are seen as having potential not only to limit emissions, but also to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere.

In theory, BECCS would combine features of bio-energy—the use for fuel of crops grown for that purpose, which absorb CO<sub>2</sub> from the air as they grow—with features of “traditional” CCS technology—the capturing and burying in the earth of some of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions released when the fuel is burned. In this way, the theory goes, BECCS could not merely *avoid* CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but actually *eliminate* them from other sources. Unlike CCS for coal—which has been applied at pilot-project scale (although not successfully commercialized)—BECCS has hardly been implemented at all, even in research and pilot phases. Critics have pointed out that, given the assumptions made in constructing the mitigation scenarios that rely on BECCS, growing the plant materials necessary to make even the modest contribution anticipated in those models would involve a land mass at least the size of India, and possibly twice that.<sup>50</sup> Growing such materials would also require enormous quantities of water (roughly the same as what is used for all current global agriculture) and utilizing them for energy would involve large quantities of liquid fuels for harvest and transport. And all of this still leaves the vast uncertainties about long-term impacts from underground storage of captured carbon, which is already a major issue for fossil fuel-based CCS.

In the IEA’s B2DS, BECCS plays a significant role in decarbonizing power generation, being relied upon to remove nearly 5GT of emissions annually by 2060.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, according to the OECD, limiting CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations to levels associated with the Paris targets “depends significantly on the use of BECCS.”<sup>52</sup> Figueres’ Mission 2020 (mentioned above) notes that current annual emissions will take the world past the 1.5°C threshold in just 5 to 15 years, which means staying within that limit is “already unachievable without massive application of largely unproven and speculative carbon dioxide removal technologies” such as BECCS.<sup>53</sup> As Richard Martin notes for *MIT Technology Review*, of the 116 mitigation scenarios reviewed by the IPCC to achieve 2°C or less, fully 101 involve some form of negative emissions technologies.<sup>54</sup>

### Science, Ambition, Action: “Alarming Inconsistencies”

The revised mitigation scenarios that have surfaced following the Paris Agreement and its temperature thresholds and emissions targets are, to say the least, extremely daunting. As noted in Part One, the IPCC’s emissions reduction targets and timetables recognized in late 2007 at COP13 in Bali were already a massive challenge, but a decade has since passed and emissions have risen by roughly one-fifth.

The emissions pledges made by governments before and during COP21 in Paris were hailed as the most ambitious ever offered. But taken together, the NDCs reveal a massive gulf between the aggregated contributions of those pledges and the emissions reductions levels required to avoid crossing the 1.5 degrees (or even “well below 2 degrees”) threshold. This “ambition deficit” is an uncontested fact. There are, in the words of one analyst, “alarming inconsistencies between science-based targets and national commitments.”<sup>55</sup>



Instead of *reducing* emissions, the NDCs will, even if fully achieved, result in an *increase* in emissions—albeit a slower increase than under a “business-as-usual” scenario. As the IEA notes, “There is no peak in sight for world energy-related CO2 emissions” as a result of the Paris pledges. “Emissions are projected to be 8 percent higher than 2013 levels in 2030... while primary energy demand grows by around 20 percent.”<sup>56</sup> According to UNEP’s 2017 *Emissions Gap* report:

*The gap between the reductions needed and the national pledges made in Paris is alarmingly high.... Looking beyond 2030, it is clear that if the emissions gap is not closed by 2030, it is extremely unlikely that the goal of holding global warming to well below 2°C can still be reached.*<sup>57</sup>

More alarming still is the fact that in just the two years that have passed since the Paris talks, nearly two-thirds of countries are already falling behind on progress towards their respective national targets.<sup>58</sup>

### **Beyond Ambition Fixation**

To its credit, the ITUC and most of the international trade union community has consistently supported the science-based emissions targets proposed by the IPCC and others. Unions have realized for some years that reaching these targets will require dramatic changes in key economic sectors—changes that must be made over the course of the next two or three decades. Unions have therefore been among the many voices calling repeatedly for “more ambition” on the part of governments and the so-named “international community,” in the hope that the latter will wake up to the danger of climate change and take the kinds of steps that are necessary to bring national commitments in line with targets.

Given the continued lack of adequate progress, it is time for unions and their allies to acknowledge that the alleged lack of ambition requires

a deeper explanation—one that takes seriously the systemic roots of the problem. Today it is clear that the emissions reduction scenarios consistent with both the temperature thresholds adopted in Paris and the need for net-zero emissions are impossible to achieve without deep, systemic change. This will require a Just Transition politics that frames this indisputable fact honestly and accurately, and then pursues a path capable of bringing the political economy into alignment with scientific and ecological necessity.

In the lead-up to COP22 in Marrakech in late 2016, the ITUC observed that staying well below 2°C in average temperature increase, and aiming for 1.5°C, “will only be reached if concrete measures are taken to dramatically change our production and consumption patterns.”<sup>59</sup> Clearly, a net-zero economy will bear little resemblance to the current “50 billion MT” economy. The trade union approach to Just Transition must therefore operate from a clear understanding that the transition to a sustainable, low-carbon economy is not going to happen without a radical shift in politics and policy. We have tried to capture the scale of the challenge by referring to broad targets based on the science and incorporated into the Paris Agreement. In doing so, we have demonstrated that the transition, far from being “inevitable,” is in fact extremely unlikely—and it is not remotely on track to take place rapidly enough to avoid breaking through very dangerous temperature thresholds, without a dramatic break from “business as usual.”

### **Just Transition: Let’s Own It**

Calls for “more ambition” and repeated appeals to leaders to “show political will” are therefore clearly not enough, and have become habitual and ritualistic. Identifying the need to radically change production and consumption patterns is an important starting point for unions and



for the broader Just Transition movement, but it cannot be left there. Neither can the task of adjusting to a warming world. Those in charge of the transition to a resilient low-carbon future have failed. What we have witnessed is more than two decades of talk with nothing like the sort of action necessary to back it up. This is not a problem of “political will”; it is a problem of the capitalist political economy and the imperatives of perpetual expansion on which it is based.

But even assessing the challenge in systemic terms, while important, can only take us so far—just as identifying “crisis tendencies” in the political economy does not add up to framework for action that is informed by a clear set of alternatives. As unions consider what they can do to advance a Just Transition, a key part of this effort will be to propose transformational sector-by-sector strategies while not losing sight of the interconnected nature of the entire economy. Unions can use data that have already been generated in order to acquire at least a quali-

tative grasp of what needs to be done in terms of different sectors.<sup>60</sup> The quantity of data available has risen dramatically over the course of the past decade, and the quality of these data has also improved. Some unions have already begun to develop this work, as have many of their natural allies in the NGO community.<sup>61</sup>

For trade unions, a compelling Just Transition politics will be grounded in scientific realities. Unions understand that any serious response to these realities will require far-reaching economic and social change. In the following section of this paper, we will critically examine the Social Dialogue approach to Just Transition and explain its origins and its evolution over recent decades. We will show that this approach is more aspirational than real, and is presently holding back the kinds of discussions trade unions and their allies need to be having about both the systemic roots of the socioecological crisis and how it can be confronted in a way that builds political power for workers and communities.

### Part Three: The Social Dialogue Approach

In Part One, we provided a brief political history of Just Transition, and of how it came to be referenced in the preface to the Paris Climate Agreement. This achievement has opened up an important debate across the global labor movement (and other social movements) about how to turn Just Transition into reality.

In Part Two, we looked in broad terms at the depth and scope of the transition required in light of the science and the Paris commitments, and at the daunting decarbonization scenarios that have been proposed. As ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow expressed it in early 2018, turning such scenarios into reality will require “an industrial transformation on a scale that we’ve never seen before.”<sup>62</sup>

In this section, we review the politics behind the Social Dialogue approach to Just Transition. This review is important because Social Dialogue is the dominant trade union discourse on Just Transition today. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that Social Dialogue *pre-dates* trade union involvement in the UNFCCC and other multilateral processes. That is, Social Dialogue established itself as the dominant discourse on Just Transition *before the nature and scale of the task of transitioning to a low-carbon economy had become clear.*

But as a guiding vision for unions, Social Dialogue has also changed over time. Where once it was envisaged as an arrangement between purportedly equal partners (governments, employ-



ers, and unions), it has gradually evolved into a future-focused agenda: one where union “peak bodies” appeal to governments and companies to embrace a different economic paradigm, and one that is more socially just and more ecologically sustainable. However, the commitments to growth (albeit “green growth”) and competitiveness remain paramount. Thus the Social Dialogue label has stayed the same across several decades, but the content has changed quite dramatically. We will now review this in some detail.

## The Inseparables

An awareness of the details and key moments behind the history of Social Dialogue helps explain why Just Transition is currently so intertwined with endorsements of it—so much so that it is often not clear whether Social Dialogue is being proposed as a means to achieve a Just Transition, or whether Just Transition is being used to sustain an ideological commitment to Social Dialogue.

As we will also explain, the Social Dialogue approach views the actual transition to a low-carbon economy to be primarily the responsibility of others—mainly governments, corporations, and investors. The role of unions is to strive to make sure the transition is fair, and in return unions will be better placed to fully engage workers in this transition. Giving workers “a seat at the table,” and therefore a voice in shaping their own futures, whether at work or in the broader discourse, lies at the heart of this approach—but as followers and facilitators, rather than as leaders or active agents of change. This relative passivity is one of most problematic features of the Social Dialogue approach.

## Social Dialogue: In the Beginning

Social Dialogue (and its close associate “Social Partnership”) today lies at the heart of global

trade union politics and of the dominant discourse around Just Transition. It is therefore central to trade union engagement at the international level—a connective narrative for unions on a range of key issues and challenges facing workers, such as the right to freedom of association, international trade, new forms of work, sustainable development and, in recent years, climate protection.

It is well established and widely recognized that Social Dialogue originated as an expression of the “historic compromise” or “social pact” of post-war Europe, versions of which also emerged in the US and other developed countries. While “corporatist” arrangements and national-level compromises between unions, governments, and employers’ organizations have been commonplace, these have also been interrupted by periods of conflict and militancy. Despite this, Social Dialogue in Europe effectively codifies a rejection of “class struggle” politics in favor of a “permanent peace.”

But the rejection of ongoing conflict came from a position of trade union *strength*, and from the *growing* political power of left and social democratic parties at that time. Unions’ *social power* had been the product of decades of militant, class-based activism (including industrial action) by unions in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. With the onset of the protracted post-war economic recovery, social democratic and socialist parties broke, one by one, with their more radical pasts and embraced the compromise—a compromise based on results: union recognition, real social protections (the “welfare state”), and a relatively fair distribution of the (growing) economic surplus.

The Cold War also increased pressure on employers and the representatives of capital to work with and accommodate—or alternatively, to attempt to repress—unions during this peri-



od. In key countries of the global South, trade unionism and left ideas were generally in the ascendency, as were anti-colonial and national liberation struggles. Formal and institutionalized systems of collective bargaining, worker rights, and labor market protections proliferated as a result of these political realities.

### The Treaty of Rome

The European Union (EU) institutionalized Social Dialogue and Social Partnership as core principles of the Treaty of Rome that founded today's European project in 1957—originally called the “Treaty establishing the European Economic Community” (TEEC), and renamed in 2009 as the “Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)”—and the European Social Charter signed at Turin in October 1961. Together these foundational documents established commitments on the part of the Social Partners to improve working conditions, social security and social protection of workers, as well as unemployment benefits and provisions. They also endorsed processes of consultation between workers and employers, and recognized the right of workers to be represented in the workplace. The Treaty of Rome also established the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Parliament, Council and Commission became legally obliged to consult the EESC when passing new laws.<sup>63</sup> In 1998, European sectorial social dialogue committees (SSDCs) were established.<sup>64</sup>

As of 2016, Social Dialogue had produced a total of 23 agreements (either in the form of EU directives or as autonomous agreements). These agreements cover parental leave, part-time and fixed-term work, telework, work-related stress, harassment and violence at work, etc. Social Dialogue also produced an elaborate system of bilateral (employers and unions) and trilateral (employers, unions, governments) processes facilitated by the European Commission.<sup>65</sup>

### The Market Fights Back: The Maastricht Agreement and the Lisbon Strategy

Over the past few decades, the sweeping range of policy shifts and attacks on worker protections that have characterized the “neoliberal period” have steadily eroded the social power and institutional reach of organized labor. This process began in the 1970s, due in large part to the failure of Keynesian policies to deal with the economic crisis brought on by the “oil shock” of 1973-74—a crisis marked by stagnant or negative economic growth mixed with high levels of monetary inflation, or “stagflation.”

During the 1980s, social democratic parties in Europe began to embrace (or simply adapted to) many of the pro-market positions of the neoliberals, often encapsulated in UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's notorious insistence that “there is no alternative.” Attempts to resist the neoliberal onslaught failed, often miserably. In France, the Mitterrand government of the early 1980s pledged to expand state ownership, but then backtracked following a “flight of capital” that negatively impacted France's economy. By the second half of the 1990s, the Socialist government of Lionel Jospin privatized more than the previous six governments put together and overseas financial firms took large stakes in many of the privatized corporations. Jospin also cut public pensions, introduced fiscal austerity, and reduced worker rights.<sup>66</sup>

The Maastricht Treaty of 1991 formally institutionalized Social Dialogue in its “Social Protocol.” Far more significant than this, however, was the Treaty's successful push to institutionalize market-dominated politics and imposed strict controls on public borrowing and spending (the “Maastricht criteria”). These controls prohibited any member state from embarking on a detour towards Keynesian-like deficit financing or “reflation.” It also locked in austerity as the only policy response to economic down-



turns, such as the one triggered by the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Meanwhile, through the Social Protocol, employers got what they wanted—namely, to make Social Dialogue legally non-binding.<sup>67</sup>

In 2000, the European Council adopted the “Lisbon Strategy.” This became another important moment in that it aimed to increase European competitiveness by investing in a knowledge-based and highly productive society. The Lisbon Strategy required unions to accept “competitiveness-enhancing” measures as a means of ensuring “flexibility” both in the labor market and in the workplace. Flexibility would then help sustain the European social model and its developed systems of social security (or social protections).<sup>68</sup> This became known as “flexicurity.” Unions were urged to regard social security measures and “access to employment” as more important than (purportedly “inflexible”) job protections tied to traditional contractual arrangements and procedures. The thinking behind Lisbon was simple: in a highly competitive world Europe had no option but to enhance its competitiveness and to become more “dynamic” and “innovative.” Competitiveness was seen as the means by which European workers would be able to continue to enjoy good living standards and a high level of social security.

### **Union Encounters With the “Third Way”**

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) accepted the Lisbon Strategy, but warned, “the search for a new dynamism in the European economy must be undertaken without endangering the basic elements of the European social model.”<sup>69</sup> The political investment of trade unions in the idea of Europe’s competitiveness was not without precedent. Indeed, the rationale for a European “Common Market” in the early post-war period grew out of concerns regarding the competitiveness of Europe

in the face of the economic dominance of the United States.

But the search for a new dynamism would soon go beyond the Lisbon provisions. The “Third Way” thinking that characterized New Labour and the Blair government in the UK (1997-2007), followed by Gerhard Schröder’s Social Democratic (SPD) government in Germany (1998-2005) and the adoption, in 2003, of “Agenda 2010” further shifted politics and policy towards the market and weakened the commitment to sustaining social protections. For “Third Way” thinkers, the goal of social democracy was not to “change, reform, or manage markets” in a manner consistent with social democracy’s historic priorities but, rather, to “attempt to improve the empowerment of our citizens to do better in these markets.”<sup>70</sup> Put differently, the Third Way inverted the idea that markets need to be brought into alignment with social needs, and instead stressed the responsibility of people to adapt to the needs of global markets.<sup>71</sup> Whereas Lisbon accepted the need to preserve social security (and thus basic welfare provisions), the Third Way saw those same standards as a drag on competitiveness—and therefore an obstacle to investment and innovation that needed to be diminished if not removed altogether.<sup>72</sup>

### **Small Wins, Big Defeats**

In terms of the future debate on Just Transition, it is important to note that Social Dialogue was prolific in producing structures and decisions at the EU and sectorial level, and became more institutionalized over time.<sup>73</sup> A number of such decisions did produce positive outcomes for workers (such as parental leave, for example). Today’s advocates of Social Dialogue are often quick to remind us of these achievements.

But there is no hiding from the fact that these positive outcomes occurred just as attacks on unions and social protections were moving



forward at full speed. The Social Protocol under Maastricht was introduced in 2001, but this period coincided with a number of EU Directives that pushed liberalization of financial services and the utilities sector, and the European Court of Justice (ECJ) made several judgments that affirmed economic freedoms over the right of member states to protect social standards and, in the case of the Laval decision, imposed limits on unions to engage in industrial action.<sup>74</sup> Contrary to the initial conception of Social Partnership, all of the key economic and political decisions that advanced the neoliberal agenda were contrary to the stated wishes of unions at all levels.

In some respects, the “productivity” of Social Dialogue around important but ultimately secondary questions helped legitimize and sustain the idea of Social Partnership. But the end result is indisputable: workplace rights and protections, on the one hand, *and* social security or welfare provisions, on the other, have since been seriously undermined.

### **Collective Bargaining Under Attack**

Another clear outcome of the neoliberal offensive against unions has been the decline of collective bargaining in Europe. Writing for the journal *Social Europe*, Thorsten Schulten recently described the “destruction of long-standing structures of national and industry negotiation,” noting how “Systems of collective bargaining that were once robust have been systematically eroded and destroyed. The collective agreement itself—as an instrument for collectively regulating wages and other employment conditions—is manifestly now at risk.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, a 2017 assessment of data for the period 2000-2015 by the European Trade Union Institute noted that “the trend has clearly been towards lower collective bargaining coverage, which directly goes against the declared objective of the EU to increase the role of collective bargaining

and social dialogue at all levels as a means of regulation in the fields of social policy, employment, and health and safety protection.”<sup>76</sup>

The collapse of collective bargaining has obvious implications for Just Transition and its prospects either at the level of the workplace or in the context of national and sectorial level agreements. Put simply, if union representation and collective bargaining are both shrinking, then Just Transition in workplaces or across sectors will be more difficult either to create or to replicate. And if social protections are being stripped away, there is no stable social floor upon which specific Just Transition measures can be secured. Advocates of Social Dialogue are aware of this reality, but they have yet to come to terms with its political and ideological implications.

### **Social Democracy’s Electoral Melt-down**

The prospect of achieving a Just Transition through Social Dialogue has also been severely compromised by the loss of support for social democratic parties. Third Way thinking marked an ideological shift, but the full impact of that shift only became clear with the financial crisis and recession of 2007-2008, when social democrats (as well as parties of the center and right) administered far-reaching austerity measures. The results have been little short of catastrophic, both for the millions of people across Europe affected by the cuts and for the parties carrying them out. Electorally, no force has suffered more than the traditional social democratic parties. Schröder’s SPD had lost power in 2005 with unemployment in Germany standing at 5 million and inequality levels rising. In the 2017 elections the SPD’s vote fell to 20.5%—its lowest percentage in the entire post-war period. PASOK, the dominant party in Greece in the early 1980s, has seen its general election vote collapse to just 6%. The national vote of Spain’s social democratic party, the PSOE, has fallen



more than 20% in just 5 years, from 44% to 23%. In France, the social democratic *Parti Socialiste*, won 39% of the vote in the first round of the 2011 general election, and won the second round with 57% of the vote; in the 2017 general election the party won just 6.3%.<sup>77</sup>

When assessing the prospects for Just Transition, the electoral meltdown of social democracy is hugely significant, especially when viewed in the light of the collapse of collective bargaining and social protections. Social democratic parties were once the primary political voice of organized labor, with few exceptions, but in many countries today unions can no longer count on support from any well-established political party through which they can exert significant influence. Equally concerning, for the most part the established social democratic parties have not led the social struggles against austerity, and in many instances have not participated in them at all. Instead, the resistance has been led, albeit imperfectly and sometimes with hesitation, by new forces of the left (particularly in Southern Europe). Of course, various right-wing and neo-nationalist parties have also benefited from the vacuum created by the collapse of the social democratic parties, brought on by their embrace of anti-worker, “competitiveness-enhancing” policies.<sup>78</sup>

## The Long Goodbye

Who is responsible for the dismantling of bargaining and shortening the reach of collective agreements? Who is driving the erosion of social protections? Changes in the economy (such as automation or the relative decline of manufacturing) have had an effect, but both governments and employers share this responsibility. Not only have they systematically attacked worker and social protections, they have also used legal and other means to prevent unions from establishing themselves in new industries.

From this, we can conclude that Social Partnership and Social Dialogue are currently both alive and well—but only between employers and governments. If any more evidence were sought, one need look no further than the European Commission’s Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN), which, in 2012, endorsed a series of “employment-friendly reforms,” including: (a) decentralization of wage setting and collective bargaining; (b) wider scope for employers to derogate from industry-level agreements in the workplace; and, (c) limitations on the extension of collective agreements to non-signatory employers. The recommendations also identified “an overall reduction in the wage-setting power of trade unions” as part of these reforms.<sup>79</sup>

The Commission’s 2012 proposals were identical to the proposals of the major employers. Unions are not only excluded, but whatever “dialogue” that has taken place at the EU level between employers and EU officials has clearly *targeted them*, and the social function of protecting and representing workers they have historically performed.

## A New Social Pact?

Also in 2012, the ETUC called for a new Social Compact for Europe, and warned that the downward pressure on wages would impede or prevent “sustainable growth.”<sup>80</sup> A year later, the ETUC’s General Secretary Bernadette Ségol acknowledged that this call for a Social Compact had fallen on deaf ears: “Over the recent period there has been no social initiative from the EU, no serious effort to stop wage and social dumping and no demand made to Member States to promote an effective social dialogue.”<sup>81</sup>

In a 2013 essay, ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow used even stronger language:

*We need a fundamental change in paradigm....  
If during the crisis workers’ organizations could*



*have anticipated that a new era of (social) dialogue had begun, the moment has clearly passed. Our social “partners” have left the restaurant and presented us with the bill: austerity, tax increases, wage concessions, increased precariousness, public sector retrenchment, cuts in public pensions and so on.<sup>82</sup>*

The ETUC called for a “new social pact” for Europe, pointing out that “The European Social Model, which was a benchmark for the rest of the world, has been weakened, jeopardised, and in some countries even dismantled.”<sup>83</sup>

The fact that leading trade union figures and bodies had at this point begun to express intense frustration with the other Social Partners is hardly surprising given the neoliberal trajectory of Europe in recent decades. By calling for a New Social Pact in 2012, the ETUC was making an appeal to the Social Partners to re-commit to the partnership they entered in 1957 with the adoption of the Treaty of Rome. In the years since, the situation for a growing number of workers—particularly in southern Europe—has become more precarious and uncertain, inequality has increased, and the EU itself is facing a serious crisis of legitimacy.

From this history spanning five or six decades we can reach several clear conclusions—conclusions that, for many trade unionists, are already well known and indisputable. Firstly, the Europe that both produced and anchored Social Dialogue and Social Partnership no longer exists. Secondly, the political space for Social Dialogue—along with decent wages, secure work, and social justice and equality—became severely restricted as a result of the landmark agreements made at Maastricht and Lisbon and in numerous EU directives and decisions since then. Thirdly, the embrace of “Third Way” politics too often turned social democratic parties into enthusiastic enforcers of austerity, enemies of collective representation, and dismantlers of social protections. This has led to a precipitous loss of electoral strength, effectively destroying

parties that had once left their mark on history and improved the lives of millions of workers for decades.

## Social Dialogue 2.0: “Green Growth”

Despite these developments, Social Dialogue has gradually been elevated to the level of a connective ideology for the established international trade union bodies, in that it has informed and shaped trade union positions on many of the major global questions concerning workers today.<sup>84</sup> Just Transition is no exception. As noted above, Just Transition is currently so intertwined with endorsements of Social Dialogue that it is often not clear whether Social Dialogue is being proposed as a means to achieve a Just Transition, or whether the idea of Just Transition is seen as a means to salvage or reinvent Social Dialogue. This entanglement of the two draws attention to the absence of an overarching narrative that is more in step with social and political realities. It also reflects a lingering inclination on the part of some unions to try to rebuild Social Dialogue on the strength of a basic argument that worker and social protections, collective bargaining, etc., serve both as cornerstones and the means to achieve a more socially sustainable and competitive economy.

For unions working on global questions like climate change, the meaning of Social Dialogue has shifted decisively over time—but the implications of this shift have perhaps not been fully recognized or acknowledged. Where once it was understood to be part of a “social contract” arrangement between roughly equal partners, Social Dialogue has since become more aspirational, centering around an appeal for governments and companies to embrace a different economic paradigm, one that is more socially and ecologically sustainable.

The outline of a new way of framing Social Dialogue began to emerge roughly a decade ago,



when the ITUC joined with UNEP and the ILO to promote a jobs-focused version of “green growth.” As noted in Part One, what began as a “safety net” clause for specific groups of workers took on a much broader meaning during this time, as “a means to bring economic life into a democratic and sustainable framework, one grounded in meaningful social dialogue and driven by broadly shared economic and social priorities.” On this view, the goal of Just Transition was to help establish “a new mode of production and consumption that allows for greater social inclusion, equity, and opportunity.” In the words of the ILO, the goal of government policy should be to “influence the market and encourage the private sector towards a green transition and overcome the problems of missing private price signals,” with public investment playing “a complementary role to larger market-based mechanisms.”<sup>85</sup> Either way, “social dialogue is critically important both to ease some of the tensions between business, trade unions, and civil society around the coming transition, and to frame the issues in ways that can help realize the many mutually beneficial features of a green and sustainable future.”<sup>86</sup>

Significantly, in imparting this message, unions echoed the reasoning of Nicholas Stern, probably the world’s leading advocate of a market-based approach to climate protection. In his 2006 study *The Stern Review*, he had warned that failure to take prompt action on climate change would invite massive economic disruption in the coming decades on a scale larger than the combined impact of the two world wars and the Great Depression.<sup>87</sup> But, Stern suggested, taking action now would have the opposite effect; it would open up a new period of protracted economic expansion—thus “green growth.”

Thus it is not surprising that some unions would explicitly connect Just Transition to a “green growth” agenda for both Europe and the world, and to stress its “mutually beneficial” features. Doing so appeared to offer a lifeline for Social

Dialogue at a time when the original version had almost disappeared beneath a deluge of neoliberal reforms. Whether consciously or otherwise, unions echoed Stern in evoking the urgent need for decisive action. In this respect, scientific necessity became a surrogate for the kinds of conscious working class and trade union organizing and action that in the past been able to produce many reforms and improvements. Where once unions reveled in their strength in the workplace and in politics to drive change, they now appealed for governments and corporations to show sufficient “political will” in order to prevent climate-related economic and social disruption.

When viewed in this light the ITUC’s contagious slogan, “There are no jobs on a dead planet,” sends two messages. The first message is to unions and workers: by supporting “green growth,” unions can once again acquire recognition by employers and governments and reclaim their “seat at the table.” Embracing the transition will also lead to plentiful green jobs in years to come. The second message is to business and governments: respect the science, invest in the green economy—because failure to do so will lead to a crisis of civilizational proportions.

## Growing the Transition

Social Dialogue 2.0 retains the kind of union commitment to growth and competitiveness that we saw in the debate surrounding the Lisbon Strategy around year 2000. The ETUC had been willing to make concessions to help Europe regain its competitiveness, and in order to generate enough growth to sustain “the basic elements of the European social model.” The ongoing and seemingly systematic unraveling of social and workplace protections has not altered this growth-focused logic. The open-ended commitment to growth and competitiveness are currently still perceived to be essential to the effort to preserve what is left of social and worker protections. During the



deep recession of 2007-2008, unions called for a return to growth (whether green or not-so-green) as a way to “exit from the crisis.”<sup>88</sup> Interventions to redistribute wealth were also proposed, but the emphasis was on growing the economy and then making sure that the distribution of wealth was more equal once growth was restored to pre-recession levels.

Thus we can also see the imprint that both Lisbon and Third Way ideas have had on today’s Just Transition discussions. Workers (indeed employers also) need to be helped in order to adapt to the demands of a low-carbon economy—a move that, according to “green growth” advocates, will also be good for both competitiveness and job creation. This is consistent with the ETUC’s current approach to economic policy: competitiveness is achieved through social protections, which are the result of Social Dialogue, and this will lead to recovery and growth. In this way, Just Transition seems to have become essentially another “flexicurity” mechanism to help restore competitiveness while providing some kind of social safety net for workers economically harmed or displaced.

Of course, there is no room in this approach for the kind of robust interventions that were discussed in Part Two above, interventions that are needed to shape, disrupt, or collapse certain markets in order to make sure the transition to a low-carbon future or a “zero-carbon world” will actually occur. Rather, the “industrial transformation on a scale that we’ve never seen before” is expected to occur as a result of a carbon price, some policy signals and incentives, and “ambitious” targets. Such an approach to Just Transition leaves the direction and management of the societal transition to investors and companies, locked inescapably into the blind logic of markets, and urges governments to “send signals” to influence the behavior of both.

As we have shown in Part Two, to say that these signals are currently not strong enough to drive

the kind of fundamental changes that are required would be an enormous understatement. In fact, they seem very unlikely ever to become strong enough. Yet this is the vision of the future to which Just Transition has, for now, become attached.

### **Examples of Just Transition: What Do They Tell Us?**

The Social Dialogue discourse has in recent years implied that Just Transition is in the process of becoming a reality. The energy transition, we are told, is “well under way,” even if it still requires further encouragement. At times we are even told it is “inevitable”—a claim which, as we have seen, is simply not true.

But what about the transition as it applies to workers? During the past decade, proponents of the Social Dialogue approach to Just Transition have pointed to cases where employers, government authorities, and unions have worked together—in various combinations, and at different levels (local, municipal, regional, or national)—to produce satisfactory outcomes for workers.

The ITUC’s alliance with UNEP and the ILO, in 2008, attempted to showcase national-level examples of Just Transition, maintaining that, “national governments, employers’ organizations, and union bodies are in a number of instances presently working towards the goal of a Just Transition.”<sup>89</sup> Just Transition was then described as “an emerging framework.” For a brief period, there was optimism expressed with regard to tripartite national-level social dialogue roundtables, such as the roundtables that emerged in Spain under the social democratic government from 2004-2011.<sup>90</sup>

But where do things stand now? In May 2017, ITUC’s Just Transition Center submitted a report to the OECD, offering examples of Just Transi-

tion processes at enterprise, community, and national levels. These were offered as illustrations of the roles of various stakeholders in such processes, or as examples based on “their ability to illustrate key policy issues for decision-makers.” But these examples are not convincingly indicative of any significant, growing trend. As the report acknowledges, “there are few examples of just transition in the context of climate action.”<sup>91</sup> In all, the report’s examples either demonstrate where structures and processes of Social Dialogue still exist, or where something resembling them could be said to exist. This is hardly surprising, since one criterion for the selection of examples was “compliance with the key components of the ILO Guidelines for a Just Transition”—which includes a commitment to Social Dialogue. This makes it especially important to grasp that, given the state of Social Dialogue today, rather than increasing, such examples seem more likely to become increasingly rare in the years ahead without decisive intervention to alter the course of key political and economic trends.

### The Visibility Risk

Despite the scarcity of examples, or any sense that those examples that do exist convincingly suggest a growing trend, Just Transition has now established itself politically at the UNFCCC, the ILO, the SDGs, and elsewhere. It has become visible to the point of being referenced in all of the major documents and statements in recent years, at the Rio Earth Summit in 2012, the ILO Guidelines for Just Transition in 2015, and the Paris Climate Agreement that was ratified in 2016.

But this political success is at least partially due to the fact that Just Transition has been defined in a way that poses little or no challenge to the mainstream, pro-growth, business-dominated narrative—a narrative that was largely created by the liberal wing of the global corporate elite.

Indeed, unions had to fight hard to get the word “workers” into any of these statements, let alone the word “union.” Today there exists something of a transactional arrangement, where unions committed to Social Dialogue reinforce the perspective of major institutions in return for those same institutions publicly (if inconsistently) acknowledging that the needs of workers should be taken into account in the coming transition. These partnerships have also provided a platform for the ITUC, in particular, to pursue closer ties with business interests and investors in the creation of a global compact aimed at pushing Just Transition as part of a broader global economic transformation—an issue we return to below.

There is, however, a real risk that the visibility of Just Transition will mask what is really happening at the level of both politics and the economy. We have already seen how in Europe the processes of Social Dialogue produced an abundance of decisions and positive outcomes around the terms and conditions of employment and worker representation, but the policy decisions that really mattered were made by governments in collusion with employers (the “ruling partners”), and were shaped by their shared neoliberal objectives and commitments.

To further illustrate the danger to Just Transition, we can look at the political history of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda (DWA). In 1999, the ILO identified four pillars to decent work, namely, rights at work (through Core Labor Standards, or CLS), employment creation, social protection, and Social Dialogue.<sup>92</sup> Since its launch, the DWA has been adopted at the highest levels of the UN, including the General Assembly, and also (in 2007) by the G8.

However, the high-level political support garnered for the DWA over almost two decades has unfolded precisely at a time when the prospects for decent work as defined by the ILO are clearly deteriorating in many parts of the world.



In a 2008 report, the ILO stated, “over the past 15 years or so, the incidence of non-standard employment has tended to increase in the majority of countries for which information could be collected.”<sup>93</sup> Almost a decade later, in 2017, the ILO’s *World Employment Social Outlook*, stated that 1.4 billion workers—or more than 42% of all workers globally—were in vulnerable and precarious employment, and that the numbers in OECD countries were also growing. It added, “The number of workers in vulnerable forms of employment is projected to grow globally by 11 million per year.... At the same time, in light of exacerbating global uncertainty, the risk of social unrest or discontent has heightened across almost all regions.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, even as political support for the DWA has risen, decent work itself has become increasingly scarce.

The warning to unions should be clear: As long as Just Transition is framed in a benign and non-confrontational way, high-level political support for the idea will probably continue to grow. Some may interpret this as progress, but others will see it as a concession at the level of words that serves to conceal the harsh impacts of social and economic changes that, for all the disruption they entail, emphatically do not represent a transition to a sustainable, low-carbon economy—let alone one that can accommodate basic worker rights and protections.

### **Another Relaunch Is Possible—But Will It Stay Afloat?**

In 2016 the European Commission under President Jean-Claude Juncker committed to re-launching Social Dialogue.<sup>95</sup> However, a joint declaration issued by the ETUC and the other social partners delivered a distinctly pro-market message, including the need for the EU to “remove obstacles to investment, entrepreneurship and job creation” in order to “improve Europe’s attractiveness as a place to invest.”<sup>96</sup> Thus we have further evidence that Social Di-

alogue continues to evolve in an increasingly pro-market direction. The ETUC’s 2016 *Platform on the Future of Europe* again spoke up for the Social Model, pointing out that the “mainstream narrative considers it an obstacle to competitiveness and economic growth.” The ETUC added, “It must be recognised that countries with high wages, strong social dialogue and collective bargaining, sound social protection systems, are the ones that perform better in the economy.”<sup>97</sup> The unavoidable truth, however, is that the drivers of economic policy in the EU long ago abandoned such a model. The ETUC’s message also contained a stark warning, “The European Union is now at a crossroads: either it is reshaped and reformed into a fairer and more social Europe, or it will collapse.”<sup>98</sup>

### **The Just Transition Center and the B Team**

At the global level, the work of the Just Transition Center (JTC) illustrates a desire on the part of some unions to forge an even closer relationship to a section of global capital, including financial institutions. This has led to de-emphasizing the role of unions in the process of creating a Just Transition, replacing references to unions with “workers” or “employees.”

The JTC was established by the ITUC in late 2016 as a means to promote Just Transition in the post-Paris period. The ITUC’s principal partners in this initiative are corporations and investor groups known as the “The B Team” and “We Mean Business.” The B Team describes itself as “a not-for-profit initiative formed by a global group of business leaders to catalyse a better way of doing business, for the wellbeing of people and the planet”<sup>99</sup> and is co-chaired by Richard Branson, founder and head of the Virgin Group. Meanwhile, “We Mean Business” is a coalition whose mission is to “catalyze business action and drive policy ambition to accelerate the low-carbon transition.”<sup>100</sup> Other bodies



associated with the Center include the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and UNEP.<sup>101</sup>

The Center's association with the B Team is potentially controversial. In early 2018, the B Team released a video on Just Transition titled *A Net Zero Future That Leaves No One Behind*, which featured JTC director Samantha Smith and the ITUC's General Secretary Sharan Burrow, along with Branson, various CEOs, and leading civil society figures.<sup>102</sup> Strikingly, the word "union" is not used by anyone appearing in the video. This may seem like a trivial point to some. But as noted in Part One above, the concept of Just Transition emerged from the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) in the 1980s campaigns directed against the actions of oil, chemical, and nuclear weapons companies. Led by Tony Mazzocchi, OCAW was at the time among the most militant and radical unions in the United States. But it is the JTC's approach, and not Mazzocchi's, that today defines how Just Transition is being framed in venues like the World Economic Forum, the UNFCCC, the ILO, and other global spaces.

At COP23 in Bonn, it became clear that a main focus of the JTC would be to work to engage some of the world's leading corporations in the effort to turn Just Transition into reality. The JTC and the B Team jointly organized a "Business Briefing" in order to "discuss business' role in the just transition, examine the actions of leading businesses and demonstrate practical steps businesses can take to get started."<sup>103</sup> Reporting from the meeting, the JTC stated:

*We set ourselves out from other organisations working in this space, in that we work directly with business, collaborate with unions, and utilise the ILO and Paris Agreement negotiated definition for just transition. Our work is critical to ensuring that "just transition" doesn't become a "buzzword" for any social measures linked to climate action, but represents a strong, clearly defined process that both workers and employers respect and are committed to fulfilling. Potentially two new companies*

*were motivated to consider how they would make a just transition. This would be done in collaboration with JTC.*<sup>104</sup>

There are surely some trade unionists who feel the association with Branson and the B Team creates desirable visibility for the idea of Just Transition. But this is the same Richard Branson who personally intervened in the struggle by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) to organize Virgin Atlantic, in a (successful) anti-union campaign, accusing TWU of "threatening to change the essence of what make us 'Virgin America'—our culture—and trade that for the tired old roadmap that guides our competitors. This is your chance to fight for what sets us apart."<sup>105</sup> Branson has also been hostile to unions in the UK.<sup>106</sup> Clearly, when Branson says, "valuing people and the planet is actually great news for the bottom line," his "bottom line" leaves no space for workers to exercise their democratic right to a join a union or not, without interference from their employer.<sup>107</sup>

## Broadening the Debate

Where institutions and structures of Social Dialogue exist and are producing good outcomes for workers, it makes sense to continue to take advantage of them and extend their reach when possible. But there is no escaping the fact that Social Dialogue today reflects the politics and class relations of a period of history that *has long since passed*. Its structures are for the most part *residual* and mostly confined to Europe. And although structures of consultation between unions, employers, and governments exist in many parts of the world, these are tied to long-established systems of industrial relations, and are normally not endorsed or certified as expressions of Social Partnership, or part of some "permanent" arrangement between different actors.

Either way, at the company level the old "industrial relations," based on well-established and



formalized union-management processes and procedures, have already conceded considerable space to “flexible” business practices that have removed or navigated around worker protections, rights, and due process. This is not confined to Europe. The OECD’s *Employment Outlook 2017* reported that just 17% of workers in the OECD are members of a union—a decline of nearly half from the 30% density in 1985. Importantly, just 7% of young workers are unionized. The share of workers in the OECD who are covered by a collective agreement has also declined from 45% to 30% during the same period.<sup>108</sup> Outside of the OECD, reliable data for union density and collective bargaining are more difficult to find, but the picture is almost certainly similar, rare exceptions notwithstanding.

Even in Europe, both Social Dialogue and Social Partnership seem indisputably more aspirational than real. Unions, in tandem with the social democratic parties with which many of them are aligned, have made a series of accommodations that, intentionally or not, have effectively shifted the meaning of Social Dialogue to the point where it entails a largely uncritical endorsement of the “green growth” framework and agenda. Social Dialogue is therefore having a disarming effect on a global trade union movement that already has fewer and smaller weapons at its disposal than probably at any time since the mid-to-late 1800s.

It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that Social Dialogue is simply not up to the task of bringing about any kind of societal transition. On an ideological level, the advocates of Social Dialogue have shown little or no interest in ques-

tioning the ability of those forces currently driving the expansion of the economy and the rise in emissions to meet the challenge before us all, let alone challenging their right to continue determining the course we are collectively on.

The recent rise in activism around Just Transition presents an opportunity to have a real debate over the future of worker organizing, programmatic goals and political strategy—a debate informed by the fact that a radical restructuring of the political economy is necessary, and those currently claiming to lead that process have had little success in altering the course of events.

### Facing the New Reality

For unions engaged in various international processes, the elevation of Social Dialogue to the status of an ideology—one increasingly tied to a pro-market and competitiveness-focused “green growth” agenda—brings with it many dangers. Given the institutional crisis of the labor movement, the threat of climate change, and the radical nature of the changes need to create a path to a sustainable future, it is clear that these dangers go far beyond determining the fate of Just Transition as a motivating force or concept. Open discussion is needed in order to develop new ideas and new strategies around organizing, policy, and politics. Unions, with their allies, can develop an integrated and transformational politics that can infuse Just Transition with the kind of radical approaches the situation demands. We return to this issue in the final section.

## Part Four: A Social Power Approach

In Part Three we drew attention to the seemingly limited potential of Social Dialogue, as cur-

rently understood and advanced, either to deliver a Just Transition for workers or to make a





meaningful contribution towards achieving the kinds of transformative changes that are necessary to secure a low-carbon and truly sustainable future.

In this section, we describe how a new trade union approach to Just Transition has begun to emerge in recent years. In contrast to “Social Dialogue”—a term that is widely and frequently used—this new approach does not yet have any clearly identifiable signature or commonly accepted name that might serve as a clear point of reference. For present purposes, we will call it the “Social Power” approach.

It is important to emphasize that the term Social Power is used for convenience and for discussion purposes only. This new approach is still very much in the process of *cohering* around a new set of programmatic commitments and ideas for action on the ground. It is reflected in a series of proposals that distinguish themselves from the dominant approach by their willingness to challenge, in one form or another, existing arrangements of ownership and power, mainly by asserting, or reasserting, calls for public or social ownership and democratic control over key sectors. The examples we offer below mainly address new trade union approaches to climate change, environment and energy-related issues, but there are signs that a pro-public approach is being fueled by the increasingly undeniable failures of neoliberalism, and in response to new and ongoing calls for further privatization and liberalization. This approach has gained further impetus from political developments, with the rejection of austerity and precariousness increasingly being combined with concerns about climate change and other ecological crises.<sup>109</sup>

### **There Are No Easy Victories**

The fact that the Social Dialogue approach has not been particularly effective does not, of course, mean that an alternative approach will

automatically produce better results. The challenges facing both workers and workers’ organizations are formidable, even immense, and using more forceful language is of little help on its own. But there is simply no political case for staying confined to one approach, and no compelling justification for continuing to appeal to the so-called “Social Partners,” in the hope that they will respect agreements reached more than half a century ago—during a different historical period, and in a region of the world (namely Europe) that has become less economically and politically significant over the past two or three decades. The globalization of Social Dialogue as a trade union narrative is simply out of step with the realities facing workers in most of the world. A programmatic shift is necessary—one that reflects the challenge posed by Just Transition and can point to real solutions. Such a program may be able to win the support of some climate-concerned businesses in certain countries, that is, if they are willing to acknowledge that their pro-market approach to decarbonization is not working, and that approaches grounded in cooperation and the common good—rather than competition and private profit—need to be pursued.

It should not be assumed that an alternative to Social Dialogue must necessarily entail an exclusive endorsement of social, class, or industrial conflict. At the same time, any serious approach to Just Transition must recognize that such conflicts are part of the reality of capitalism. When considered abstractly, dialogue seems unquestionably better than conflict, but union and worker struggles (including the struggle for a Just Transition) take place in the real world, and our choices must be made in concrete contexts.

As we consider new approaches, industrial and other forms of militancy should be considered tools, not guiding principles. In some instances they can produce results, but in others they have proven ineffective. The same can be said with regard to political strategy. For almost four



decades the left has struggled to come to grips with the mobility of capital, with the corruption of democratic structures, and with the incursions of technology and changes to work processes that have fragmented and disempowered workers. Electoral successes have all too often led to previously unimaginable defeats, leaving us weaker than before. But surely the best hope for the international left and the international labor movement, given the current situation, will be predicated on our ability to frame and propose viable solutions to the many challenges we collectively face.

### The Rio+20 Moment

In 2014, the TUED Working Paper *Climate Change and the Great Inaction* documented how a growing number of unions and social movements had begun to generate what was described as a “new discourse” on sustainability and climate protection.

This was evident in the statement released in June 2012 by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment at Rio+20. The 400-person Assembly began with a presentation by Achim Steiner, then-executive director of UNEP. In a routine speech, Steiner again pointed to the “inevitable” transition to a low-carbon economy and the equally inevitable creation of millions of green jobs.

The speech was not well received. Representatives from numerous unions pointed to the growing exploitation of workers, along with the repression of environmental, indigenous, and other activists, and the contaminating impacts of “extractivism” on land, water, and air quality. The privatization of public services had turned out to be disastrous, and the “green economy” was for the most part nowhere to be seen. After an intense debate among union delegates from around the world, the Assembly released a statement asserting that the current profit-

driven system of production and consumption needs to be replaced, the commons defended, and energy brought into public ownership.<sup>110</sup>

This statement expressed rising opposition to the idea that “green growth” and the commodification of nature (though carbon pricing and reforestation incentives, etc.) are in some way key to solving the profound ecological crisis we face. Furthermore, it was argued in Rio that organizing and mobilizing union members will be easier if both the need and the call for a *transformative* approach to Just Transition are clear. Both in Rio and since then, more unions have come to the conclusion that climate protection needs to become embedded in the work that unions are currently doing to defend and promote workers’ rights, fight privatization and austerity, and defend public services. By integrating climate protection into their current battles, unions can broaden the social base of support for what they currently see as their “core agenda,” and the more class-based the agenda, the greater the potential for support.<sup>111</sup>

### Theoretical Premises: A “Crisis Tendency” of a New Type?

From these discussions it is possible to detect the outlines of a Social Power approach to Just Transition. But it is important to acknowledge that the “Rio moment” came about as a result of years of debate and discussions at venues like the World Social Forums established after the Seattle protests at the WTO Ministerial in late 1999. It is an approach that has been influenced by a distinct analysis of the current political economy’s essential characteristics and dynamics. It draws on the work conducted over several decades of other social movements made up of peasants, indigenous people, and others struggling with the same questions around economy and sustainability, and trying to shape solutions based on their own traditions and values.



The emerging (or cohering) Social Power approach is also informed by eco-socialist and radical economists, who, in various ways, have drawn attention to the fact that the “growth imperative” in capitalism puts political economy on a collision course with well-established planetary limits—consuming, corrupting, and contaminating ecosystems (sometimes called “natural capital”) in ways that threaten the delicate balances that sustain life. Since the nineteenth century, economists across the various traditions established by the likes of Mill, Marx, and Keynes have examined “crisis tendencies” in capitalism, such as the much-debated “tendency of the rate of profit to fall” and its systemic implications. But it is only in recent years that the impact of capitalist accumulation and consumption on the planet’s ecosystems—including its atmosphere and the carbon cycle—has attracted sustained attention. This impact of capitalism on ecosystems can now be regarded as a “crisis tendency” of a new type: one that is both empirically indisputable (because the data are drawn from the natural world and recognized by the scientific mainstream), and is at least as severe in terms of social implications as any imaginable economic downturn.

Beyond the world of economists, there are a growing number of voices that, having been confronted by the facts, advocate far-reaching changes in our political economy in order to make it compatible with the needs of ecosystems. For example, advocates of a “steady state” economy propose developing a “commons sector” to accompany the public and private sectors, re-localization of economies, and strict controls on the movement of capital.<sup>112</sup> Many of these proposals would have quite radical impacts on “capitalism as usual,” but they often display a degree of confidence in “common sense” that hardly seems warranted, and tend to assume that policy changes can impede the logic of accumulation without challenging ownership relations and existing configurations of economic power. In common with the

“green growth” theorists and their obsession with “sending signals,” these voices evince a deep-seated reluctance to endorse taking control of and reorganizing the dominant sectors of the economy, including finance, energy, telecommunications, logistics, food and agriculture, and land use.

### The “Great Realization” and the Minor Tragedy

For an increasing number of unions and movement allies, the present historical conjuncture has therefore become engulfed by what could be described as “the great realization”: the “normal” conflicts produced by social, class, and ownership relations under capitalism are now being aggravated by a deep *systemic* crisis, the full extent of which has only relatively recently been recognized. It is becoming more accepted that it is not possible to address the ecological crisis without addressing its systemic causes, and “green growth” will not take on that challenge because it has proven itself incapable of coming to terms with the fundamental reality that perpetual growth is not sustainable.

When seen in this light, the current crisis facing the international labor movement as an institution is a minor tragedy unfolding within a much larger civilizational calamity. Therefore it seems increasingly clear that the long-term relevance of unions—indeed, their very survival as a serious political force—can only be restored and secured if they fully accept this new reality *in its totality*, and act accordingly.

One of the most noteworthy features of the rising level of discussion on the need for fundamental change in the political economy is the limited nature of trade union engagement. In other words, these discussions have normally taken place *outside* of the labor movement and have had, until recently, only a very limited impact on a trade union discourse struggling to



come to terms with the challenges of the here and now. However, these discussions and exchanges have helped re-ignite the kind of the kind of debates on the future of capitalism and the prospects of a post-capitalist future that were once commonplace in many unions and in the parties of the left, including the social democratic parties.

Overall the intellectual ferment around this new discourse has increased, whereas the intellectual appeal of Social Dialogue has, along with Social Democracy, declined precipitously. There are many reasons for the latter's decline, but one of the main reasons is its as-yet-unconvincing, growth-focused response to the climate and ecological crisis more generally. It could even be argued that the singular focus on Social Dialogue has contributed to the deterioration of the intellectual atmosphere inside the trade union movement, effectively ruling out much critical discourse and certainly any serious discussion of radical alternatives.

### Reviving Social Democracy

Many trade unionists around the world are understandably concerned about the present crisis of social democracy. While in Europe the crisis is profoundly serious, it is in many respects a global phenomenon affecting all left-of-center parties with a historical commitment to some degree of social and economic reform. Indeed, these parties' embrace of Third Way and neoliberal thinking stretched far beyond Europe and was in many respects a global phenomenon. That Social Dialogue has itself been shaped by Third Way thinking, and seems unable to extricate itself from the logic of perpetual growth and competitiveness, leaves it ill-suited to contribute to a revival of social democracy. If anything, without a change of course, recent history suggests that the electoral meltdown of social democracy will continue, making the prospects of any future revival extremely slim.

Aware of the dangers, a growing number of voices are today calling for a reexamination of the goals and methods of social democracy, and a need to return to its more socialist and movement-building past in order to once again represent the needs and aspirations of workers in a time of growing economic uncertainty and ecological crisis. Indeed, there is a rich history upon which to draw, from the explicitly socialist Erfurt Program adopted by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1892, with its commitment to "social property and the transformation of the production of goods into socialist production," to the decisive moves toward public ownership of key industries and services taken by the Labour Party in the UK by the Atlee government immediately following World War Two. As late as the early 1980s, unions and social democrats in Sweden were seriously contemplating the expansion of social property and the extension of economic democracy through a "wage earner fund" system—essentially "collective funds" that could promote equality and drive social investments.<sup>113</sup>

Bold (and even bolder) actions along these lines are even more necessary in the context of the climate challenge. As one commentator expressed it, "While some might just close their eyes in the face of climate change, social democrats know that it is time to act when society—whose well-being is what gives us meaning—is at risk of being annihilated."<sup>114</sup> Finding an alternative to Social Dialogue can therefore be seen as part of the effort to reconstitute social democracy both ideologically and politically.<sup>115</sup>

But any social vision will have to deal with the need to apprehend and reverse current trends concerning energy demand and use, emissions, and the imperatives of growth and expansion that are the current signatures of capitalism. This is, therefore, not essentially a matter of ideology; it is a matter of survival that should transcend ideological preferences



and histories, whether they reside in unions or in other social movements.

## Is it Real? From Analysis to Action

As noted at the outset, Just Transition is currently being used to describe more than one kind of transition. One transition is protective and “worker-focused,” and the other refers to a *socioeconomic transformation* towards a “sustainable, low-carbon economy” or something similar. For this reason, the struggle for a Just Transition requires *an integrated and transformational politics*, so that today’s fights are waged with an eye on building the social power needed to challenge the status quo, and eventually to transform the global political economy. *Both* of these transitions—“worker-focused” and societal—will be contingent upon a successful challenge to existing patterns of economic ownership. Strategic sectors of the economy will need to be directed and managed by way of different mechanisms of popular and democratic control. In practical terms, any local, sectorial, or national struggle for Just Transition must put the ownership question at the heart of the trade union approach.

An initial attempt to present Just Transition in this manner was developed by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in its 2011 submission to COP17 in Durban.<sup>116</sup> In a remarkably bold and sober “Policy Framework on Climate Change” developed in the lead-up to the event, the federation’s Central Executive Committee articulated 15 principles to guide its work on climate change. The eighth asserted that, “a Just Transition to a low-carbon and climate resilient economy is required,” elaborating as follows:

*A “just transition” means changes that do not disadvantage the working class worldwide, that do not disadvantage developing countries, and where the industrialized countries pay for the damage their development has done to the*

*earth’s atmosphere. A just transition provides the opportunity for deeper transformation that includes the redistribution of power and resources towards a more just and equitable social order.*<sup>117</sup>

## Transport and Health Care Unions

Just prior to COSATU’s statement, the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) had made a very significant contribution to the effort to develop and explain practical proposals for a Just Transition for the transport sector. The ITF spent over a year exploring how transport-related emissions—which in 2009 were rising faster than in any other sector, and are still rising today—could be reduced in line with the science-based targets proposed by the IPCC and adopted by the UNFCCC. The ITF proposed a range of policies within a framework called “Reduce, Shift, Improve” (RSI).<sup>118</sup>

The RSI framework showed how the movement of goods and people could be reduced, how social and economic life could thrive under new forms of low-carbon mobility, and how certain technologies, many of them quite simple, could be harnessed to serve these ends. The ITF, representing 570 unions around the world—including those in carbon-intensive shipping and aviation—explained that jobs in transport had grown dramatically over the past thirty years, but that these additional jobs were mostly of poor quality and the health-related and environmental impacts of the huge rise in the movement of goods and people was too big a price to pay.

Significantly, the ITF drew attention to the fact that reducing emissions in transport would also require an energy revolution in order to move from oil-based mobility to mobility driven by renewable sources of power. This in turn would require the expansion of the public sphere. At the ITF’s World Congress in Mexico City in August 2010, the RSI framework was adopted with overwhelming support from the hundreds of transport unions present.



It was not a coincidence that exactly a year later, in August 2011, two US-based transport unions (Amalgamated Transit Union and Transport Workers Union) became the first unions to oppose the infamous Keystone XL pipeline—a decision that infuriated several construction unions that had aggressively supported the project, as well as some of their leaders, who would later support Trump’s “energy dominance” agenda. As an alternative, the two unions called for “major ‘New Deal’ type public interventions” in upgrading the grid, maintaining and expanding public transportation as a means to create “jobs that can help us reduce air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and improve energy efficiency.”<sup>119</sup>

Two US nurses’ unions, National Nurses United and New York State Nurses Association, as well as unions representing workers in manufacturing (United Electrical Workers) and domestic work (National Domestic Workers Alliance), also went on to oppose Keystone XL, as did 1199 SEIU. The stances taken by these unions helped President Obama decide to deny a permit for the Keystone pipeline in 2015 (a decision Trump’s State Department quickly reversed in early 2017). In 2016, many of the same unions joined the opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), which was led by the Standing Rock Sioux.<sup>120</sup> National Nurses United described the pipeline projects as “a mortal threat,” and concluded, “We have no choice but to resist.”<sup>121</sup> National Nurses United and the NY State Nurses Union have also been particularly successful in engaging members in active demonstrations against fracking, refinery expansions, and export terminal construction projects.

### Focus on Energy and the Launch of TUED

In October 2012, twenty-nine unions, including national trade union centers and global union federations, came together in New York

to discuss the global energy system. Titled *Energy Emergency, Energy Transition*, the meeting focused on the failure of “green growth” policies to impede the growing use of fossil fuels and the need to reassert social ownership and democratic control as effective policy options.

Unions like NUMSA in South Africa<sup>122</sup> and CUPE in Canada<sup>123</sup> had hitherto stepped up efforts to bring energy into public ownership and to renationalize what had been privatized. Motivated by a desire to build on these examples, the three-day meeting in New York was organized around a discussion paper titled *Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy* (“RRR”).<sup>124</sup> The RRR paper (as it has become known) proposed that the quest for energy democracy entails three broad and strategic objectives: (1) resisting the agenda of large energy corporations, (2) reclaiming to the public sphere parts of the energy economy that have been privatized or marketized, and (3) restructuring the global energy system in order to massively scale-up renewable and low-carbon energy, aggressively implement energy conservation, ensure job creation and local wealth creation, and assert greater community and democratic control over the energy sector.

The sixty-page RRR document also showed how the struggle for energy democracy is key to the struggle for climate stability. It documented how both fossil fuel use and energy-related emissions had grown dramatically during the twenty years of the UNFCCC, making efforts to control global warming and climate instability virtually impossible from a practical standpoint. RRR also focused on energy poverty. Even though more energy is being generated and consumed with each passing year, more than 1.3 billion people worldwide are without electricity access and another 1 billion have unreliable access. At least 2.7 billion people lack access to modern, non-polluting fuels. In many countries, privatization of energy has



caused price increases, declining quality and service, and underinvestment.<sup>125</sup>

The majority of unions in the room agreed to launch Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED). Five years later, these discussions have grown deeper and become more nuanced. Eleven TUED working papers have attempted to address key political as well as technical questions regarding the energy transition and the need for a “programmatically shift” at the level of global trade union policy.

As part of the struggle to reclaim the power sector to social ownership, unions are also engaged in the fight to control and localize energy supply chains. In Ontario, Canada, unions like the Canadian Auto Workers, CUPE, and UNIFOR have supported domestic content provisions. But several countries have brought complaints against such policies before the World Trade Organization (WTO)—including against Ontario’s Green Energy and Green Economy Act. The WTO’s ruling against Ontario in December 2012 (and the subsequent rejection of Canada’s appeal in May 2013) could be a harbinger for policies in other countries.<sup>126</sup>

### Reasserting a Pro-Public Narrative

In debates on development aid, the global union federations (GUFs) and the ITUC have fought against the privatization of basic services, and against the spread of “public-private partnerships” (P3s).<sup>127</sup> However, because unions support action on climate change and the “green economy” more generally, some unions—concerned that they might appear to be obstructing the transition to a low carbon future—have been reluctant to challenge the liberalization and privatization that has in many countries accompanied the deployment of privately-owned renewable energy and other “green solutions.” This is despite the fact that, in the case of renewable energy, mechanisms like feed-in-tariffs

(FITs) and “power purchase agreements” (PPAs) essentially use public funds to incentivize private investment, and the costs of the incentives are often passed on to consumers in the form of higher electricity charges.<sup>128</sup>

However, Public Services International (PSI) and its affiliates have been increasingly vocal on the need to support renewable energy initiatives that include “public ownership and management, decentralised to municipal and local levels.” PSI also seeks to “explore examples of public ownership of renewable energy systems, including at the municipal level.” As PSI notes, “Some communities are taking parts of the energy system back under public control, or into cooperative structures, exactly in order to more rapidly transition away from fossil fuels and into renewable energy sources.” And PSI’s “Research Unit” (PSIRU) has developed a detailed, thorough critique of privatization and P3s over the past decade, making an invaluable contribution to the emerging trade union discourse. Similarly, important pro-public policy work has been the priority of the Transnational Institute, an influential Amsterdam-based research and advocacy institute committed to building “a just, democratic and sustainable world.”<sup>129</sup>

### UK Unions: The Corbyn Factor

In the UK, the country’s largest unions (among them UNITE, UNISON, and PCS) have been centrally involved in bringing about a very significant programmatic shift towards reclaiming the power sector to public ownership. In September 2015, in a development that few expected, left-wing MP Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party. Corbyn promised that, if elected, the Labour Party would renationalize the energy sector and break up the cartel of private energy companies known as “The Big Six.” Nationalization, according to Corbyn, would mean that “any profits made then go to the public and not to shareholders elsewhere,



and it also allows for better planning for the future.”<sup>130</sup> This new Labour Party energy vision sees a role for local producers and cooperatives, with municipal authorities also part of the new ownership and governance structures.

In June 2017, less than a year after the UK’s Brexit referendum, Tory Prime Minister Theresa May called a snap general election, encouraged by a major lead in public opinion polls and with the intention of further expanding the Tory majority in the UK Parliament, at Labour’s expense. However, her plan backfired, with Corbyn leading a massive Labour turnaround in the weeks before the election, nearly winning and catching mainstream pundits (and most others) completely by surprise. This fueled a wave of support for Corbyn’s Labour that has yet to subside. The Party’s commitment to a sweeping defense and reclamation of public services, including taking significant parts of the power sector back into public ownership, clearly resonated with voters.

Three months after this massive turnaround in public mood and opinion, in September 2017, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) voted unanimously to support Corbyn’s commitment to reclaim the sector to public ownership, and pledged to work with the Labour Party to pursue climate targets and a Just Transition.<sup>131</sup>

Earlier, in December 2016, representatives of several leading unions (including the Scottish Trades Union Congress, STUC) and major environmental groups (most prominently Friends of the Earth) convened in Glasgow, Scotland, to discuss how Just Transition “could bring a new, clean, better balanced and more just economy.”<sup>132</sup> Importantly, the proposal connected Just Transition to the potential need for different forms of ownership in key sectors:

*The government should take a decisive lead with plans to transform key sectors, for example electricity generation, energy storage, transport infrastructure, energy efficiency and sustainable*

*heating for homes and businesses. Where necessary to secure change at sufficient pace and scale, options for public and community ownership or partial stakes in flagship projects and enterprises should be pursued.*<sup>133</sup>

Also in the period leading up to the election and the 2017 TUC Congress, the UK’s Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) released a booklet titled, *Just Transition and Energy Democracy: A Civil Service Trade Union Perspective*. By explicitly linking Just Transition to energy democracy and the struggle for climate protection—all within a broad call for “re-visioning and rebuilding our public services for people not profit”—the booklet made an important contribution to the emerging Social Power approach.<sup>134</sup>

## Climate Jobs Campaigns

The trade union discussions in the UK have been clearly influenced by the emergence of the Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Union Group (CACCTU) and the path-breaking publication *One Million Climate Jobs*.<sup>135</sup> The publication serves as an example of a rigorous trade union approach to Just Transition with a focus on job creation. Endorsed by the TUC, the report delivered a strong pro-public message:

*Up to now government policy under all parties has been to use tax breaks and subsidies to encourage private industry to invest in renewable energy. That is much too slow. We want something much more like the way the government used to run the National Health Service. In effect, the government would set up a National Climate Service and employ staff to do the work that needs to be done.*

Similar campaigns have emerged in several countries, including South Africa, Portugal, Norway, and France, as well as the Basque region and New York State.<sup>136</sup> All of these campaigns express a strong and unifying pro-public message: “We don’t want governments to wait forever for the market. We want govern-





ments to start hiring workers immediately, and hire all of them within a year.”<sup>137</sup>

### South Korea: Coal Plant Closures and Energy Sector Reform

Also in 2017, the KPTU Korean Power Plant Industry Union applauded the new government’s decision to phase out older coal-fired power stations. It stated:

*Our members are the workers in charge of running coal-fired power plants. We are also Republic of Korea citizens. Although our hearts are heavy, we welcome the shutdown of worn out coal power plants because we are clear about what kind of country we want to leave for our descendants.*<sup>138</sup>

The union also made clear that its support for closures could not be separated from its demands for reform of the entire sector, the defense of “publicness” and the need to control the levels of imported coal, oil, and gas.

### South Africa: The Just Transition Strike?

Another impressive example of an integrated and transformative approach to Just Transition occurred in South Africa, when the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) declared it would be willing to engage in national strike action to defend the jobs of up to 40,000 workers in six coal-fired power stations that were targeted for closure by the national public utility, Eskom. The union connected the defense of those threatened jobs with calls for a Just Transition—a transition that would require the extension of social ownership to the renewables sector in South Africa as well as a radical reform of the utility. Rejecting the proposed plant closures and resulting trenchments, as well as a linked electricity tariff increase of nearly 20%, NUMSA declared

that it “has been left with no option but to follow all the necessary processes and embark on a rolling mass action which will not exclude a strike action.”<sup>139</sup>

In March 2018, NUMSA took legal action seeking an “interdicting order” against the signing of 27 renewable energy projects with private independent power producers (IPPs). Citing the South African government’s ratification of the Paris Agreement and its reference to Just Transition, NUMSA argued that privileging IPPs would lead to the loss of jobs as a result of the announced closures of coal-fired power stations—and was thus contrary to the spirit of Just Transition. Importantly, NUMSA also reiterated its support for socially owned renewable energy. In the words of Deputy General Secretary Karl Kloete:

*Our [NUMSA’s] position also made it clear that in our view renewable energy has great potential to give communities greater control of their resources and to satisfy their energy needs on a decentralised basis. We were, and remain, absolutely clear that renewable energy is essential to mitigate climate change and that the renewable energy sector is not developing as fast as it needs to and that a socially owned and controlled sector can push its development far faster than it is currently expanding.*<sup>140</sup>

Showing support, COSATU urged the government to “stop liberalising the energy market” and abandon “all plans to further commercialise and privatise Eskom.”<sup>141</sup>

### Trade Union Confederation of the Americas

In Latin America, unions have been part of a significant programmatic shift in the direction of a Social Power approach. This has been expressed in the positions taken by the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA), the regional arm of the ITUC. Adopted in 2014 and revised at its third Hemispheric Congress



in April 2016, TUCA's *Development Platform for the Americas* (PLADA)<sup>142</sup> states that “the commons”—including energy—should stay in the public sphere:

*The commons of humanity—biodiversity, water, seeds, forests, energy and knowledge—should not be subjected to private profit, but instead should be used responsibly for the common good....The State must ensure the public nature of commons and their collective and equitable enjoyment, defense and preservation.*<sup>143</sup>

At its Hemispheric Congress in April 2016 in Sao Paulo, TUCA affiliates unanimously called for a ban on hydraulic fracturing (fracking) for shale oil and gas across the American continent. The boldness of the vision that animates debates on energy democracy and Just Transition in Latin America will hardly surprise those who closely follow the discussions there. That vision is well expressed by Pablo Bertinat in a paper that informed a September 2017 meeting on “Energy Mix and the Commons,” held in Buenos Aires and attended by representatives of 65 unions from across the region.<sup>144</sup> In Bertinat’s words:

*Building energy sustainability requires us to develop alternatives to the concept that views energy as capital in order to strengthen the idea of the commons and rights. In this approach, it is necessary to analyse various criteria (ecological, ethical, aesthetic, cultural, economic, social, political, etc.) and nature’s intrinsic values must be recognised as being above human preferences and monetary values.*<sup>145</sup>

In all of the instances referred to above, turning such programmatic commitments into actions that truly express them is never easy or automatic. For example, the development of fracking in Argentina and the prospect of offshore drilling for oil in Brazil have pulled some unions into supporting the exploitation of “national resources” in the name of growth and development. But even here, there has been union opposition. In Argentina, unions in

the Argentine Workers’ Central-International (CTA-I) have actively supported the struggle of the Mapuche indigenous communities against fracking in the Neuquén region.<sup>146</sup>

## Just Transition, Development, and the Global South

Several of the examples above illustrate that meaningful challenges to existing power relations in support of Just Transition are already taking place, with unions in the global South playing an important role. Overall, these are powerful examples that deserve serious study and reflection, with lessons for the entire international labor movement. But they also invite a deeper reconsideration of the official development narrative of the major developing countries.

The energy consumption and emissions of the BRICS countries are currently on an upward trajectory, and this will not change even if these countries fully meet their Paris commitments. “Less developed countries” (LDCs) with much lower per-capita emissions are often understandably more focused on how to adapt to the impacts of climate change than on finding ways to reduce their emissions. But if both the BRICS and LDCs are not likely to reduce their emissions any time soon, and jobs are not being lost in energy-intensive sectors (and are, in fact, probably growing), then the worker-focused “safety net” dimension of Just Transition seems to be of little practical or political value.

What is the significance, then, of the Just Transition debate to workers outside the OECD countries? Clearly, the *societal* dimension of Just Transition is highly relevant, since there can be no “travel ban” on GHGs and, as is widely known, the levels of economic growth in countries like China and India are already having severe impacts on ecosystems, and there-

fore on human health and overall well-being.<sup>147</sup> Since the early 1990s there has been a sharp upward trend in the emissions trajectories of developing countries—which are also industrial rivals of the rich countries. This has altered global climate politics considerably in recent years. China is now the largest emitter with 30% of the world’s annual GHG emissions in 2014. Indeed, most future growth in emissions will come from the developing world, particularly the BRICS or “Big Emerging Economies” (BEEs).<sup>148</sup>

In the years preceding the adoption of the Paris Agreement, China’s position was that it should not be bound by mandatory emissions reduction requirements since: (a) it was still a developing country whose per capita emissions are lower than the developed world; (b) it needs to bring “development” to the people; and, (c) it is doing more to control its emissions trajectories than many developed countries.<sup>149</sup> But this overlooks the fact that 40% of China’s emissions are generated by just 35 cities. The GHG footprint of a person in Shanghai is now 17 tons per year, and in Beijing it is 12 tons per year (2008 figures). This can be compared to 6 tons per capita in Tokyo, and 7 tons in London and New York.<sup>150</sup> And in 2009, China’s inequality surpassed even that of the United States.<sup>151</sup>

In 2008, the UNEP-ILO-ITUC report stated:

*Just as vulnerable workers should not be asked to incur the costs of solving a problem they did not cause, the same principle should apply to resource-starved countries that today face major problems due to climate change caused by the emissions of the richer countries. The commitment by the wealthy countries under the Kyoto Protocol to assist poor countries with funds for adaptation to climate change, and to find ways to transfer green technology, will need to be met and extended into the second phase of the treaty.*<sup>152</sup>

Along these lines, the ITUC has been clear and consistent on issues of ecological debt and the

responsibilities of the developed countries in the context of “common but differentiated responsibilities.” Commitments that transfer funds from North to South in order to assist in addressing both rising emissions and the need to adapt to climate change have won support from unions and their allies, and rightly so. But the implications of the overall growth trajectories for economic activity and energy use of the major developing countries have not been seriously debated.<sup>153</sup> This reflects a confidence in the suitability of “green growth” model to the South, where it is assumed that growth will everywhere get greener over time, and the greening process needs to be accelerated in some of the larger and more energy-intensive developing economies.

A Social Power perspective can help unions and social movements begin to challenge the idea that human development is contingent on perpetual growth, and to imagine and promote alternatives. This will not be easy because Social Dialogue has not only dominated trade union discourse in Europe and one or two other countries of the OECD—many unions in the BRICS countries and across much of the global South also subscribe, although often with reservations or qualifications, to the idea that profit-driven growth is the driver of development, and that development therefore demands a commitment to profit-driven growth.

The fact that such development is frequently deeply distorted and inevitably exploitative is widely acknowledged but, among trade unions, critical discussion on “development as usual” has only recently begun to express itself. Similarly, an integrated and transformative approach to Just Transition must be able to openly address several pressing questions, and this may involve listening and learning from other social movements that have worked in the space for decades and are rethinking and redefining “sustainable development,” often from the ground up.

## Conclusion

The aforementioned examples suggest that another approach to Just Transition is in the process of cohering. We think that what unites these alternatives is the recognition that unions must seek to rebuild their social power and also ground that effort in a clear analysis of the real economy and the true extent of the socio-ecological crisis. This approach to Just Transition is very much still a work in progress. But we think that it can already be distinguished from the established Social Dialogue approach in several important respects.

Firstly, it emphatically dispels the notion that the transition to a low-carbon economy is “inevitable,” or even “well under way.”<sup>154</sup> This reduces Just Transition, in the ITUC’s words, to “a tool the trade union movement shares with the international community, aimed at smoothing the shift towards a more sustainable society and providing hope for the capacity of a ‘green economy’ to sustain decent jobs and livelihoods for all.”<sup>155</sup> Unfortunately, a Just Transition politics that adheres to this idea is simply out of step with reality. The Social Power approach asserts that the transition is *not* inevitable—indeed not even likely without a radical shift in policy, away from market-focused approaches and towards public and social ownership and democratic control of key economic sectors such as energy.

Secondly, the Social Power approach is guided by the belief that while a Just Transition is *possible*, it cannot be accomplished without a deep restructuring of the global political economy—a restructuring that is able to respond appropriately to current global trends in energy consumption and emissions levels. As documented in Part Two, the global economy currently generates 37 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually, and we are nowhere near achieving the dramatic turnaround and decrease in emissions that is necessary in order to have even a *reasonable* chance of limiting global temperature increases

to “well below 2 degrees Celsius”—let alone the less dangerous target of 1.5 degrees.

But challenging ownership relations clearly lies outside the terms of reference of Social Dialogue. Therefore, proponents of Social Dialogue sometimes go to great lengths to avoid the issue. This is despite the fact that these relations are currently highly favorable to private capital, and have been reconfigured in capital’s interest as a result of the neoliberal restructuring of the past four decades—a restructuring that has involved an across-the-board attack on public services and public ownership.

As noted in Part One, unions have supported an approach to Just Transition that takes the scientific findings seriously.<sup>156</sup> But the full implications of the science point to the need for a different set of solutions. To implement these solutions across the economy will require a sustained challenge to both the existing structures of economic ownership and the politics that protects those structures. The solutions implied by a full reckoning with the science also go beyond, and in many respects run counter to, the “green growth” framework and its commitment to privatization and liberalization. Unions have acknowledged that reaching climate targets will require nothing less than a radical transformation in production and consumption. But this will only be achieved if, in the coming years, there is a decisive expansion of economic democracy, social ownership, and participatory planning at all levels of the economy.

Thirdly, a Social Power approach to Just Transition will put greater emphasis on the need for planning and cooperation. It is well known that private, for-profit interests invariably fail to make investment decisions on the basis of long-term, collective benefit. And short-term thinking and time frames simply do not lend themselves to a Just Transition, either in specific sec-



tors or across the economy. Yet it is clear that the current crisis, if it is to be addressed, will require levels of cooperation and knowledge sharing beyond anything seen in modern times. As even the IPCC acknowledges, “Effective mitigation will not be achieved if individual agents advance their own interests independently.”<sup>157</sup> Furthermore:

*Climate change has the characteristics of a collective action problem at the global scale.... International cooperation is therefore required to effectively mitigate GHG emissions and address other climate change issues. Furthermore, research and development in support of mitigation creates knowledge spillovers. International cooperation can play a constructive role in the development, diffusion and transfer of knowledge and environmentally sound technologies.<sup>158</sup>*

Unions are well placed to reinforce the conclusions reached by the IPCC. By engaging in transformational sector-by-sector work, unions and their social allies can help show, in broad terms, both what needs to be done and how clear programmatic commitments are necessary in order to take political ownership of the transition.

Needless to say, private corporations and investors are unlikely to be moved by appeals for cooperation and sharing, even when such appeals come from scientists. For unions, the strategic objective would be to move, educate and inspire union members, progressive organizations, and the broader public, tying this to the struggle to rejuvenate the trade unions and the political left, and to improve the chances of winning power at various levels in order to drive fundamental change.

The most important conclusion the trade union movement can draw from the stark reality we face is this: The transition to a low-carbon, sustainable future *cannot* be left to the investor class, CEOs of multinational companies, or gov-

ernments that refuse to break with the current paradigm of endless growth, the imperative of profit, and the enforced chaos of competition in strategic sectors. Acting alongside other social movements, unions can begin by explaining the challenge in clear terms. Unions must then develop *transformational strategies* that are anchored in a paradigm of sharing, solidarity, and sufficiency. This is perhaps the only way to ensure a Just Transition for workers, and survival for human society as a whole.

It also cannot be over-emphasized that this solidarity and cooperation will have to be *international* in scope, and at an essentially unprecedented intensity. The international trade union movement is uniquely placed to serve and lead in the pursuit of such an aim, especially since it must take place in support of a radical, global reconfiguration of systems of production, distribution, and use. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the transformations required can even *begin* to be carried out *without* the leadership of the international trade union movement. But such leadership will also require actively building alliances with a wide range of progressive social movements around shared programmatic commitments. And it can *only* succeed if pursued in a courageous spirit of service. If ever the trade union movement had a “historic mission,” it is this. And time is running out.

A Just Transition is possible, but it will have to be *demande d and driven forward* by a broad, democratic movement, with unions playing a key role. There will be no Just Transition without social and political transformation, and such a transformation will be contingent on a successful challenge of existing ownership relations and the expansion of economic democracy at all levels. And there will be no such transformation until unions and their allies fully grasp the fact that such a transformation is both possible and absolutely necessary.

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