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# Towards ecological embeddedness in democratised workplaces: addressing climate change as a labour issue

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# **Transformative ideas – ensuring a just share of progress for all**

Edited by

**Kalina Arabadjieva, Nicola Countouris,  
Bianca Luna Fabris and Wouter Zwysen**

**etui.**



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# Chapter 10

## Towards ecological embeddedness in democratised workplaces: addressing climate change as a labour issue

Philippe Askenazy and Claude Didry

### Introduction

The climate crisis and associated public policies entail the transition of large industries, from energy generation to car manufacturing. The consequences for workers in these industries have attracted the attention of trade unions, which have proposed ambitious *manifestos* towards a ‘just transition’. The scope of such a just transition is limited mainly to activities and communities directly impacted by climate policies and to state regulations. The energy transition tends to focus on the problem of reducing or even eliminating highly polluting sectors. This is particularly true of the coal and oil industries, where the prospect of job cuts is pushing trade unions to resist the necessary adjustments. It is true that the oil industry union in Norway has undergone an important evolution by initiating negotiations on restructuring, paying due attention to social considerations (Normann and Tellmann 2021). But environmental concerns are still being promoted first and foremost by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The judgment of a Dutch civil court in 2021 ordering the supermajor Shell to reduce its worldwide CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 45 per cent by 2030 (compared with 2019 levels) followed a request by Friends of the Earth and a multitude of other environmental associations.

From an environmental labour studies standpoint,<sup>1</sup> this chapter explores how workers and trade unions in Europe can address environmental issues in all activities, including those not directly targeted by ‘just transition’ policies. Ecological conversion across the economy should emerge from the actions of workers themselves, going beyond the mere adaptation of workers in threatened occupations. This therefore leads us to consider grassroots initiatives within the workplace or local community. By departing from the so-called ‘creative destruction’ spiral, they are more likely to meet population needs, even new collective and individual needs, and improve labour relations.

Such initiatives contribute to the design of new production strategies. This intellectual dynamic we define as *ecological embeddedness* is already being pushed by ‘citizens in the workplace’ and local actors, and allows us to explore the concrete environmental issues at stake in working at an environment–labour nexus. At the same time, this dynamic brings to the fore the role of trade unions and democracy at the workplace level. This anchoring of environmental issues in economic sectors by workers themselves gives rise to a redefinition of environmental initiatives by collective actors, usually at national or even international level.

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1. See Rätzl et al. (2021) for an introduction to this emerging transdisciplinary research field.

In Section 1 we discuss the successes and limitations of the concept(s) of just transition long promoted by trade unions. Section 2 presents two cases – the cultural sector and local initiatives in a manufacturing area – that illustrate the process of ecological embeddedness via transformative ideas of citizens in the workplace and communities. Before concluding with policy perspectives for Europe, we explore, in Section 3, paths by which trade unions might promote deliberative democracy at work on ecological issues and thereby achieve embeddedness.

## 1. Just transition today: a mainstream concept

### 1.1 From a trade union concept to a pillar of the European Commission's strategy

The concept of a 'just transition' emerged at the end of the previous century. In a special issue of the *International Journal of Labour Research* entitled 'Climate change and labour: The need for a "just transition"', Rosemberg (2010) traces it back to an online text by a Canadian trade unionist Brian Kohler posted in 1998.

During the next decade, the concept of a just transition matured and became a flagship of the union movement (Pochet and Galgóczi 2012). At its second Congress the International Trade Union Confederation declared that just transition is key to the union approach to the climate challenge: 'Congress is committed to promoting an integrated approach to sustainable development through a just transition where social progress, environmental protection and economic needs are brought into a framework of democratic governance, where labour and other human rights are respected and gender equality achieved'.<sup>2</sup>

Most global and regional industrial confederations are now supporting just transitions with almost the same pillars. Take IndustriALL, a global union created in 2012 that represents 50 million workers in 140 countries in the mining, energy and manufacturing sectors, which are in the frontline of public policies on decarbonisation. IndustriALL's just transition manifesto calls for:

- an industrial policy fit for ambitious climate goals and good quality jobs;
- adequate resources to fund the transition;
- stronger collective bargaining and social dialogue to negotiate transitions;
- a toolbox of workers' rights and companies' duties to anticipate and shape change;
- tackling new skills needs and a right to quality training and lifelong learning for every worker in support of the just transition.

As Rosemberg (2010) and Pochet and Galgóczi (2012) highlighted over a decade ago, a just transition is a supporting mechanism of climate and, more generally, environmental action based on a consensus that environmental and social policies can reinforce each

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2. See [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/2CO\\_10\\_Sustainable\\_development\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_03-10-2.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/2CO_10_Sustainable_development_and_Climate_Change_03-10-2.pdf)



other. The just transition is for its promoters also a necessary condition for ensuring social and democratic acceptance of the transition towards a decarbonated economy.

This inspiring approach did not remain confined to the labour movement or environmental NGOs. In 2015, the ILO adopted the *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*. It calls for ‘coherent policies’ to provide ‘a just transition framework for all to promote the creation of more decent jobs, including, as appropriate: anticipating impacts on employment, adequate and sustainable social protection for job losses and displacement, skills development and social dialogue, including the effective exercise of the right to organise and bargain collectively’.

Its popularity has yielded a variety of ‘just transition’ concepts, ranging from a ‘neoliberal’ one to a ‘socio-ecological transformation’ (Kreinin 2020). Mainstream institutions (such as the World Bank, the IMF and the OECD) are forging their own versions of just transition narrowed down to ‘ecological modernisation’.

The European Commission’s interpretation of just transition has particular structural importance. It is a pillar of its Green Plan to meet European commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Its Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) is presented as ‘an essential tool to ensure that the transition to a climate-neutral economy takes place in an equitable way, leaving no one behind. It provides targeted support to mobilise around €55 billion over the period 2021–2027 in the most affected regions to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the transition.’ This will thus allow Member States to benefit from EU support in carbon-intensive regions and those in which the fossil fuel sector is a major provider of employment. But in the Commission’s presentation, just transition appears to be a recycling of the flexicurity that was at the heart of its employment recommendations in the 2000s. It addresses the problem of employment losses in highly unionised sectors through social compensation and flexibility, without considering the capacity of workers themselves to develop transformative proposals for the economic activities in which they are involved.

## 1.2 A Schumpeterian approach

One criticism of this just transition approach is that by focusing on climate challenges, it does not embrace all environmental issues, especially preservation of biodiversity. Here we point out another double caveat. First, fundamentally, just transition is a response to the destruction of old carbonised activities and the creation of ‘neutral’ ones and ways of accelerating this transition. Therefore, the main targets are agriculture, energy, manufacturing and transport, the workers in these sectors, and the regions in which these industries and their workers are historically settled. This leaves large portions of the economy, territories and workforce outside the scope of just transition. In this framework, the global outlook for Europe seems encouraging because the EU has reached its own target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (though without integrating carbon leakage, such as offshoring manufacturing to China). Second, it does not depart from ‘Schumpeterian’ growth that encourages the exploitation of nature;

on the contrary, it puts Schumpeterian technological innovation front and centre in building a sustainable world. In that framework, however, rentier capitalism and even financialisation can indulge in greenwashing.

This narrowed version of just transition leads to two dead-ends. The first is the scale of emissions reductions required and the preservation of biodiversity, which mean that all economic activities need to be involved, not just the most emitting sectors. The second is democratic. In the process of destruction that the transition implies, what distinguishes a just transition from an unjust transition is the implementation of social measures to tackle job losses. Having said that, the just transition is based on a view of a hierarchical organisation of economic activities, in which public policies are relayed by company managements. This framework may legitimise the view that environmental issues are a corporate prerogative, part of corporate social responsibility, thereby excluding various stakeholders, such as trade unions, workers and citizens in general. This gives rise to profound challenges to the economic fabric, which may tend over the medium to long term to turn unemployed workers and, more broadly, part of local populations against transition, whether just or unjust. In the United States, the climate-hostile policy promoted by Donald Trump has reinforced an already strong opposition on the part of employees and areas that have benefited from the revival of coal following the restarting of thermal power stations. Similarly, the success of extreme right-wing populism in Europe also feeds on industrial nostalgia and is gaining ground in deindustrialised territories, even within the framework of deindustrialisation justified by ecological transition. Furthermore, the European energy crisis in the wake of the Russian aggression in Ukraine fuels arguments for maintaining the use of coal to secure European independence. Even the ambitious agenda of the socio-ecological version of just transition will find it hard to overcome this political impasse.

Even if the just transition has been successful to date, it remains politically fragile and is now a victim of its own success: co-opted by mainstream institutions, it is losing its capacity to carry transformative ideas.

Unionisation seems to encourage a shift among workers toward greater acceptance of the need to prioritise environmental issues (Rinqvist 2021). But here again, a hierarchical vision of society prevails in which it is up to the trade unions to relay public policies. Moreover, the hypothesis of a systematic trade union orientation towards a pro-ecological transition has been questioned: environmental labour studies highlight the contradictions that run through trade unionism.<sup>3</sup> The challenge is then both to question production processes in all economic sectors, including expanding ones, to support workers in their reframing initiatives and to forge an ecological hegemony based on workplace democracy. To rephrase the statutes of the First International, the ecological emancipation of the workers must be the workers' own doing.

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3. German and Austrian industrial unions have been examined particularly closely by the literature (for example, Kraemer 2018; Barth and Littig 2021; Pichler et al. 2021). Their positions also express an attachment to maintaining the industrial activities at the core of their domestic economies, on which they can build or support transformative initiatives.

## 2. Ecological embeddedness

### 2.1 What could be the next step in addressing this challenge?

Workers' collectives and local initiatives are inspiring. They have basically two motives: the decarbonisation of the industry in which they work and/or the local environmental impact of current and future production. This reframing addresses the whole production process, including the location of workplaces and human resource management. The nature of the final output may also be called into question. As a result of such questions ecological issues may become *embedded* within production, and not just an adaptation to climate change or new regulations for the market economy which is at the heart of the European construction. This means, in Polanyi's perspective, the reduction of criticisms of a socially disembodied economy to the market principle as the most efficient allocation system in history (North 1977). By contrast, ecological issues can be raised within the material processes of production by the workers themselves. This echoes the notion of a 'new economy of the labour contract [suggesting] the characteristics of new industrial relations which, oblivious to the impersonal laws of the competitive economy, must immerse themselves in a context where "everything is the environment"' (Lyon-Caen and Perulli 2022). Interestingly, this orientation is outlined by initiatives emerging in industries not targeted by government climate/environmental policy. In this section we present two illustrations: bifurcations in the cultural sector and a local initiative in a French manufacturing area.

But first, a few remarks about so-called 'slow fashion' (a term coined by design activist Kate Fletcher). Fashion is at the intersection of culture and manufacturing. The concept of slow fashion generally describes a holistic approach that opposes the dominant fast fashion model: long-lasting clothing, made locally, mainly from fair trade and sustainable sources. Slow fashion – sustainable fashion, more broadly – has attracted considerable attention in the fashion world, from the press to NGOs, and even among academics, who have written hundreds of articles on the subject. It still has only a marginal market share, however, and despite a strong increase it is not expected to become really significant within the next 10 years. This raises the idea that sustainable fashion is a myth (Pucker 2022). But this failure derives not from the behaviour of consumers, especially those on lower incomes (von Busch 2022), but from the strategies of large companies, which have managed to water down slow fashion by multiplying their 'organic', 'fair trade' and 'clean' labels, claims of corporate social and environmental responsibility and promises of recycling and second-hand products. Finally, the workers in this ultra-segmented industry have not been able to get involved in the transformation of production. This is the essential difference from our case studies (see below).

### 2.2 Slow culture

The culture sector is fundamentally characterised by creation and innovation. But it has become a prime example of a maelstrom of creative destruction, driven by financialisation, the growing commodification of public goods and services, and

competitive pressures, including on public institutions facing budgetary restrictions in the wake of the implementation of New Public Management techniques. In a race for prestige and funding opportunities, museums, theatres or philharmonic institutions have continued to inflate their annual offerings. A concert that requires many sessions to rehearse can thus give rise to a very small number of performances over the course of a season, perhaps even one or two, and is categorised as ‘exceptional’. This bulimia is accompanied by a rapid rotation of artists and technicians, invitations of foreign orchestras, the moving of physical artworks, and so on, all with a heavy carbon footprint. Moreover, these practices allow only a few motivated connoisseurs to access art. By contrast, to boost profitability, many prestigious festivals aim to attract a growing audience and across increasing geographical distances. In addition to the travel of the spectators and the artists, gigantism requires the use and displacement of massive equipment from one event to another. Furthermore, unregulated financialisation continues to spread rapidly in the cultural sector. In just a few quarters, for example, the non-fungible token (NFT) market has attracted billions of dollars, creating income opportunities for artists but also speculative and exclusive markets based on energy-intensive blockchain technology.

These trends also have direct consequences for workers in the cultural sector. In addition to the precariousness of their jobs, artists and technicians often have to settle in very large urban centres, offering the best opportunities for work at national and international level. For example, in France, a quarter of all performing arts workers are packed into inner Paris, which accounts for only 3 per cent of the total French population, and another quarter live in Greater Paris.

The first initiatives for environmental sustainability emerged around three axes: since the late twentieth century, cultural projects have often formed part of the transitions of historical extractive or manufacturing sites.<sup>4</sup> The cultural sector can influence citizens’ values and awareness of environmental issues (the ‘Don’t Look Up’ effect). Finally, it can improve its own production processes to limit its carbon/environmental footprints.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, cultural workers’ environmental and decarbonisation concerns have instigated discussions on a bifurcation of productive approaches to production.<sup>6</sup> Their transformative potential is such that they can lead to the correction not only of environmental but also of social drift (Askenazy 2022).

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4. For example, former mines or plants are transformed into museums as part of industrial installations: examples include the UNESCO World Heritage Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen and the Cité des sciences at the Belval steel plant in Luxembourg.
  5. Various calculators, toolkits and specific actions have been developed to reduce this footprint. For example, the German Association of Museums has compiled a list of recommended actions to save energy; the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Modern Art offers a ‘Toolkit on Environmental Sustainability in Museum Practice’; in France, the Ecoprod initiative of TV channels and public funders has produced a guide for ‘eco-production’ in the TV/film industry; in the United Kingdom, the Albert Consortium promotes ‘A screen new deal – a route map to sustainable film production’; and throughout Switzerland, OFFCUT collects a variety of used and discarded materials for creative reuse in sculptures or stage sets.
  6. Covid-19 has also stimulated thoughts on a bifurcation of culture in certain countries, such as Belgium: <https://linard.cfwb.be/files/Documents/futur-culture.pdf>

One exemplary form of practice is to extend the duration of performances or exhibitions, shifting from a logic of creative destruction to what we call here *slow creation*. If building a spectacle or exhibition can itself be considered creation, and attracting artists from elsewhere as enrichment, they should be offered to the widest possible public and at the lowest possible environmental cost. An alternative production model might comprise a smaller repertoire, with more performances: preparation time and the number of rehearsals would be reduced in favour of performance time and so a wider audience, with fixed and limited equipment. Low-carbon residencies would replace serial and ephemeral invitations. Gig workers would gain stability and more complete work periods. In addition to changes in the internal production model of each cultural institution, incentives could be established to facilitate pooling between cultural establishments in the same geographical area, including across borders, whether on a permanent or a seasonal basis, for instance for festivals. Performing arts professionals have suggested a systematic mutualisation of invitations of international artists, reducing their ecological cost, while opening up the financial possibility of attracting new guests.<sup>7</sup> A commitment by establishments to use local labour would allow these workers to relocate, which would also foster stability and reduce the number of long professional journeys. Through this twofold pooling, culture would become both more local and more international, more sustainable and democratic, and more creative.

Innovation also flourishes outside institutions. Inspired by short-circuit initiatives in the social and solidarity economy, such as fruit and vegetable baskets from local producers,<sup>8</sup> grassroots initiatives propose to redesign the relationship between ‘consumers’ and art and artists, offering new prospects for the latter in terms of income security and visibility. They are springing up in metropolises such as Brussels (Kilti) or in small towns such as Alençon in Normandy (Transtopie). These associations offer ‘cultural baskets’, often on a monthly basis, for prices ranging from 10 to 20 euros. The ‘basket’ includes a selection of shows, local art objects or artistic workshops. The buyer can discover new arts and local artistic offerings. Some associations also collect donations from micro-patrons, thus reclaiming the advantageous tax status of patronage and charity (which hitherto has been largely captured by the wealthy and corporations). Local artists are finding a new, relatively stable and permanent source of income.

### 2.3 Local creative conservation in manufacturing

The starting point in this case is a restructuring of a plant along lines familiar in the age of global capitalism. This plant is owned by the company La Chapelle-Darblay, located near Rouen (France), which is a subsidiary of Finnish group United Paper Mills (UPM). In response to falling demand for newsprint, the group organised the sale of La Chapelle-Darblay in 2019. This decision is part of a global strategy to close plants. By

7. See, for example, <https://theshiftproject.org/article/decarboner-culture-rapport-2021>

8. Vegetable box schemes in the United Kingdom and Solidarische Landwirtschaft in Germany. Even in France, thousands of Associations pour le maintien d’une agriculture paysanne have been created, which account for less than 1 per cent of all farms in France in terms of agricultural exploitation (Paranthoën 2020). In contrast to slow fashion, however, the agro-industry has not been able to co-opt or dilute these initiatives.

limiting paper production, however, it has fuelled an increase in its price and boosted the profitability of the remaining plants (the EU Commission is also investigating a potential cartel of European producers).<sup>9</sup>

The facility ceased its activities in 2020 and most of the staff (228 employees) were made redundant (in June 2021). Within the sector the prevalent feeling is that ‘it is very Schumpeterian. Some sites are closing, others are opening’, according to an insider quoted in *Le Monde* (11/09/2019). Over five years (2014–2019), employment in the sector fell from 15,000 to 11,000 in France. Within this corporate group, this has become routine since the mid 2010s, in the context of declining newspaper readership. The French subsidiary, one of the last of this group in France, produces one quarter of the newsprint in the country and remains profitable, but its production seems to have no future in the age of digital press. White knights are thin on the ground, but in October 2021 the group received an offer of an alliance between two large family-owned French firms: Paprec, which plans to develop heat production through the incineration of waste after its sorting, and Samfi, which plans to construct a hydrogen production installation. Most of the workforce of La Chapelle-Darblay has been laid off, but the project aims to instigate an industrial dynamic that evokes Schumpeterian ‘creative destruction’. Waste sorting and hydrogen production are not central to the restructuring, which seeks to improve profitability, but they would help to ‘green’ the group’s basic financial motivation.

This green aspect of the project was called into question by the fact the plant being closed already recycles about 40 per cent of paper waste in France. This argument was crucial for the three trade unionists who were among the last employees involved in securing the site. Two of them belong to the CGT and the third is an elected representative of CGC (for management employees). These trade unionists mobilised the support of a new and improbable alliance launched by the CGT, Greenpeace and the French anti-globalisation organisation ATTAC. This alliance, which also includes many other associations, entered the public arena in May 2020, publishing a bifurcation plan based on a variety of proposals, ranging from Covid-19 prevention to agricultural and food transition. It covers ecological (conversion of production), social (employment) and political (democratisation) issues.<sup>10</sup> Its creation was followed by a rapid mushrooming of local sections addressing local issues.

The mobilisation sparked by the closure of La Chapelle-Darblay became an ecological cause at the local level and eventually at the national level. The leaders of the CGT, Greenpeace and ATTAC visited the facility, and ecological activists were impressed by the expertise of local unionists. Meanwhile, the trade unionists managed to develop an association between Veolia, a French multinational in the utilities sector, and Fibre

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9. UPM is also trying to maximise its profits by slashing the *acquis* of workers. During the first half of 2022, UPM had to cope with a strike in Finland, which has become the longest strike in the country’s history. This strike was caused by the group’s challenge to the single paper industry agreement dating from the 1940s and the introduction of company-specific collective agreements in order to achieve flexibility (by unbundling working conditions at the company level) and competitiveness (by making concessions on working time).

10. [https://cdn.greenpeace.fr/site/uploads/2021/08/plan-de-rupture.pdf?\\_ga=2.182039716.2015194825.1664314791-810678325.1664314791](https://cdn.greenpeace.fr/site/uploads/2021/08/plan-de-rupture.pdf?_ga=2.182039716.2015194825.1664314791-810678325.1664314791)

Excellence, a Canadian multinational in the paper sector<sup>11</sup>, which had made a proposal that UPM refused to consider. The main aim was the rescue of an industry anchored in the circular economy, preserving French recycling capacity with regard to collected waste paper. In other words, ecology was at the core of the project. This went hand in hand with an evolution from graphic paper to cardboard (linked to the increase in e-commerce) without dismantling the existing equipment. This evolutionary dynamic is far removed from creative destruction and it preserves industrial potential and employment in the local area. It shows that industry does not necessarily conflict with ecology, as its preservation enables controls and improvements in production processes that relocation to more permissive countries would impede.

This mobilisation has changed the fortunes of La Chapelle-Darblay dramatically: at the end of 2021, the sale of the factory to Paprec-Samfi was halted by the Métropole Rouen Normandie (the public body grouping Rouen and its suburbs). They threatened to exercise their pre-emptive right in property sales ‘in the public interest’. It was not a question of assuming control over company assets, but of being able to arbitrate in favour of a takeover that would promote recycling and contribute to the development of the circular economy.

This position taken by local elected officials provoked a reaction from central government. It first rejected the alternative project, citing the existence of a neighbouring facility that already produces cardboard and thus a risk of overcapacity. But the mayor of Rouen (a former ATTAC activist, but now a leader of the Socialist Party), together with other left-wing mayors in Normandy, argued that the two facilities are in fact complementary. A transpartisan petition against the government’s position was signed by 50 mayors of the region, including former centre-right prime minister and also mayor of Le Havre, Édouard Philippe. Eventually, UPM gave up its initial plan, and the project developed by the local union representatives and NGOs was approved.

These two case studies in very different activities share common characteristics regarding a bifurcation based on the embedding of ecological features in the production process. Their starting point is the environmental concerns of workers and of local actors. The upshot was the proposal not only of alternative and economically sustainable production processes, but also of alternative outputs that may better meet demand or the needs of local communities. They depart from the creative destruction spiral: creation and innovation remain central, but destruction is limited.

The environment is not merely a tool for promoting old agendas, such as increasing wages and preserving jobs, in order to mitigate the impacts of modern capitalism. Embedding responses to various environmental issues (climate, circularity, biodiversity) in both the logic and the means of production made it possible to tackle social rifts, not cause them.

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11. The paper sector is highly concentrated on a global scale, which is evidenced in the case of Excellence Fibre, by a shareholding dominated by an Indonesian family.

### 3. What roles for trade unions?

Ecological embeddedness can thus become a new horizon for the labour movement, combining its social and ecological objectives. In that perspective, the firm is a key level. Specifically, it is in the workplace that the current instrumental relationship with nature and the race for short-term profits are imposed, innovations are disseminated, and labour relations and democracy – including conflicts – are located. How can trade unions operate within the firm or community to promote transformation? In this section, we outline a few avenues.

Historically, trade unions have made demands on behalf of employees in relation to pay, employment and working conditions. These issues remain crucial for unions, especially in a period of inflation. They are essentially a question of sharing economic value added, including gender equality. At the same time, investment is called for in order to preserve or increase employment. Environmental issues are still addressed mainly in relation to working conditions, including occupational safety and health at work and work–life balance. In this perspective, trade unions are facing not only an environment–labour nexus in industries in transition, but also a wage–nature nexus, including in some expanding sectors. Their aims seem difficult to reconcile with the reframing of company business models to mitigate the economic rents extracted from the direct or indirect exploitation of nature. Generally speaking, demanding state regulation and state intervention, including nationalisation (as in the just transition agenda) neglects the dilemma at the firm/local level between protecting jobs and protection of the environment.<sup>12</sup>

In our view, in order to overcome this dilemma, unions should strive to become an institutional voice of ‘citizen workers’ and try to cultivate appropriate values among their members. This approach could be implemented in three steps at the workplace/firm level.

A **first** step is to collect and then disseminate information on environmental issues among workers. Many trade unions across Europe already disseminate knowledge on climate change or shrinking biodiversity. The challenge is to focus on the production processes in which workers are involved.<sup>13</sup> Trade unions can utilise their expertise in

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12. The case of Taranto described in Greco (2023) is particularly suggestive. Taranto is home to Europe’s largest steel mill, which accounts for about 40 per cent of Italian steel production. Using coal, the plant is carbon-intensive. After a court ordered production to be stopped because of environmental and health damage (the site emitted about 8 per cent of Europe’s total dioxin), despite government orders to allow production to continue, the unsustainability of the current steel plant became clear. For the unions, the employment–environment dilemma was acute: even so-called ‘green steel’ would lead to redundancies. Their support for the renationalisation of the plant was a way of avoiding this dilemma somewhat by at least bringing to an end private shareholders’ quest for short-term profits. Eventually, the government is planning a transition to green steel with EU support: Taranto is one of the two Italian regions supported by the Just Transition Fund (see Section 1).

13. Unions can try to obtain new information rights for works councils and other workers’ representative bodies across Europe. For example in France, thanks to a law enacted in 2021, employers have to provide the Economic and Social Committee (CSE) in firms with 50 or more workers with a database including statistics on the ‘environmental consequences of the company’s activity’. The CSE can also appoint a chartered accountant who provides it with information on ‘all the economic, financial, social or environmental elements’ needed to understand the firm’s strategic orientation.



occupational health and safety to tackle the environmental externalities of production. They could conduct employee surveys to identify companies' environmental footprints. In many countries, they could mobilise mandatory information tools or request external audits on employment prospects, major organisational changes and so on, systematically demanding an environmental component. If relevant, such information could be shared with local communities or associations. This step also includes the mobilisation of trade unions against discrimination or sanctions against whistleblowers warning of the environmental damage caused by their companies.

A **second** step would be to organise discussions on environmental issues at workplace level involving not only trade union members but all workers, who are both citizens of the polity and 'citizens in the firm'. In large organisations, discussions could be limited to a random assembly of workers. We can expect that such a process would yield shared transformative ideas. Well-informed citizens' assemblies on climate change – admittedly in another framework – have proved able to reach a consensus based on breakthrough measures.<sup>14</sup> And fundamentally, as we illustrated in Section 2, collectives of workers can develop or encourage the development of comprehensive proposals to overcome the job/rent-seeking/nature Gordian Knot. Workers' knowledge of production processes is essential to understanding not only the negative externalities of activities, but also their environmental potential. As we have seen, in the cultural realm and the case of live performances, the cohesion of work collectives makes it possible to capitalise on the advantages of extending the runs of particular shows for the benefit of both the workers involved and the population. In the case of the Rouen paper mill, paper recycling is crucial within the framework of environmental mitigation.

Such an approach would not necessarily be limited to employees, but may also satisfy the longer-term interests of companies or industries planning beyond the immediate satisfaction of shareholders.<sup>15</sup> Consensus remains exceptional in the context of global financialisation, however, in which climate change is difficult to address even in the most polluting industries.

Therefore, in a **third** step, trade unions as representative bodies have to present workers' ideas to the employer. This can be handled by union representatives trained in or dedicated to environmental issues. In the United Kingdom, the Trades Union Congress and its affiliates have already appointed such 'green reps' in many workplaces. British trade unions are campaigning for better rights for these reps to help them influence the environmental agenda at work, emulating the rights of health and safety representatives. Institutions already in place can be used. For example, in France, the social and economic committee expresses 'the collective voice of workers

14. See for the Irish Citizens' Assembly, Devaney et al. (2020), and for the French Citizens' Climate Convention, Giraudet et al. (2022). Proposals of the Citizens' Climate Convention (PT 4.2 and PT 6.1) were transcribed into the 2021 French law to open up new rights for works councils (see note 13).

15. For example, in contrast with the Taranto case (see note 12), the Steel Action Concept in Germany is supported by both the German Steel Federation and IG Metall. This 'concept' drawn up under the leadership of the Federal Ministry for the Economy, designates an industrial policy involving the social partners in the implementation of public subsidies to transform the steel industry into a low-carbon industry and to preserve German jobs and competitiveness. Nevertheless, even with this plan the German steel sector would exceed its sectoral CO<sub>2</sub> budget for the 1.5 °C climate goal (Harpprecht et al. 2022).

so that their interests can be taken into account on an ongoing basis in decisions relating to the management and economic and financial development of the company, the organisation of work, vocational training and production techniques, particularly with regard to the environmental consequences of these decisions'. In addition, every three years, firms with at least 300 employees have to bargain with union delegates on the firm's strategy for jobs and career paths, in particular taking into consideration the 'challenges of the ecological transition'. Trade unions can thus embed environmental issues concerning production processes in these mandatory negotiations. In the German codetermination framework, workers on the executive board can directly promote the proposals developed in step 2.<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen with the case of La Chapelle-Darblay, trade unions should not neglect the support of other stakeholders: local populations, local authorities and NGOs. In the face of financialised capitalism, achieving ecological embeddedness can even involve the threat of nationalisation or other forms of public control.

Such a trade union approach can help to cement democracy. Indeed, in terms of Dewey's conception of democracy (Festenstein 2019), 'informed' citizens – here workers and their representatives – are able to take part in deliberations aimed at designing the future of activities and jobs. This deliberative process could thus deliver substantive democracy (Cohen 1996).

#### **4. Policy perspectives for Europe**

The pandemic crisis has proved the crucial role of workers' initiatives at workplace level in fostering the resilience of social and economic activities, especially in so-called essential sectors. At present, European policy on tackling the climate crisis still focuses on pushing agents to decarbonise their activities using a variety of technocratic tools: carbon pricing (at domestic level and across borders), reducing fossil fuel subsidies, regulations and subsidies or direct investment for decarbonisation, including innovative technology. In this framework, a just transition aims primarily to ensure the social acceptability of this strategy rather than a 'great transformation' in Polanyi's sense (2001 [1944]).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, this strategy does little to bring citizens on board. The carbon market will remain a speculative and opaque market despite recent reforms. Furthermore, regulations and taxes fuel the 'punitive ecology' argument, in the words of French far-right leader Marine le Pen, namely that environmental measures tend to be implemented at the expense of citizens, workers and local areas. The political risk, then, is that a conservative-nationalist majority in Europe would derail any ambitious climate policy.

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16. See also on the role of codetermination in Germany, Zimmer's chapter in this volume.

17. According to Polanyi, the 'great transformation' resulted from the contradictions of a market-based society. It encompassed major institutional bifurcations during the 1930s, oscillating between the totalitarian revolution of Nazism in Germany and the democratic revival of the New Deal in the USA.

Our analysis suggests that another, more ‘democracy-friendly’ strategy should be deployed to overcome this social and political deadlock: promoting initiatives involving workers and union representatives to embed ecology in the production process at the workplace level, where an absolute decoupling between production and emissions has to be achieved. We also show how local anchoring is crucial when tackling an industry’s climate impact. This local anchoring appears to be the right level for raising awareness among workers and communities. In this process, as Pochet (2022) concludes, the ‘model of exchange [based on] providing the consumer with ever cheaper products from ever further away ... has become outdated’. A circular-economy approach paves the way for revamping the European Single Market towards the reshoring of local industrial activities in order to address socio-environmental dumping and to secure supply chains following lessons from the current ‘polycrisis’.

We have proposed various measures that unions might take up in response to the polycrisis, but how can the European Union also help to encourage transformative ideas from citizens and workers? First, the European social *acquis* should be expanded. The directive of 2002 on workers’ information and consultation (in firms of more than 50 employees and establishments of more than 20 employees) can be updated to include environmental issues. But we also advocate the introduction of new European instruments in the area of collective bargaining in order to provide European unions with tools to participate in decision-making on the future of firms and the world of work. In particular, public subsidies to companies could be made conditional on workers’ involvement in the organisation of decarbonised production, in contrast to the current Just Transition Fund, within the framework of which this is merely voluntary. This involvement could be institutionalised on the basis of a socio-ecological dialogue at workplace, local or industry levels.

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## **Transformative ideas – ensuring a just share of progress for all**

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