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# Social Movement Learning for a Just Transition in Appalachia

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## Social Movement Learning for a Just Transition in Appalachia

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**Abstract:** This article explores Just Transition and social movement learning as a part of community development and organizing strategies to move beyond coal in Appalachia.

**Key words:** Just Transition, social movement learning, Appalachia, popular education

The global coal market decline is increasing the need for economic transition (Evans & Phelan, 2016). This has precipitated communities to focus on what is being called “Just Transition,” which consists of “a strategy for reconciling the needs of workers with the imperative of environmental reform” (Abraham, 2017, p. 222). This is defined by one local community organization as, “a comprehensive effort to support coal communities and workers as we shift away from a fossil fuel economy to one that is more sustainable and equitable,” (“KFTC,” n.d.). This includes efforts to bolster clean energy in addition to being focused on increasing jobs and protecting workers (Brecher, 2012). Just Transition efforts include a wide set of strategies, including local foods, forestry, small business development, and others (Taylor, Hufford, & Bilbrey, 2016). This roundtable will explore a research study currently in process.

This is in response to Central Appalachia’s history consisting of rural, mountainous communities that were industrialized by coal mining and have been described as internal colonies (Lewis, 1983). Increasing mechanization of the coal industry, shifts in the global market, and state policy influence the demand for coal extraction over time (Day, 1994). There are currently different mining methods being used in the region, including deep mining and strip mining (Strobo, 2012).

The coal industry continues to negatively affect local residents’ health, workplace conditions, and the environment; however, the local communities’ strong identification with coal mining remains present (Bell & York, 2010). This cultural and historical identification with the industry in a mono-economy results in significant polarization in local communities. During the last two decades, increased mechanization of the coal industry reduced employment and caused greater damage (Carley, Evans, & Konisky, 2018) in part due to the shift towards mountaintop removal mining and valley fills (MTR), where the top of the mountains are blasted off and shoved into the valleys below to expose the coal seams (McIlmoil, Hansen, Askins, & Betcher, 2013). In 2011, coal production peaked and has dropped since then (Carley et al., 2018).

Adult education has a long history of being a tool for social justice and collective action (Prins & Drayton, 2010). This type of adult education also has had a history and presence in Central Appalachia as evident through organizations like Highlander Research and Education Center (Horton & Freire, 1990). More recently, this educational work has included efforts to transition the economy in this post-industrial era (Beaver & Hansell, 2014). However, there is a gap in the research literature about the learning aspects of just transition efforts.

This research project consists of a comparative case study that will explore the similarities and differences in the learning occurring through different strategies in a Central Appalachian-based social justice organization working in communities formally dominated by the coal industry. A summary of the research questions examined coal’s influence on changing global political economy working towards a just transition, learning mechanisms in a social justice organization and subsequent action, and the role of working-class masculinity.

The research will consist of semi-structured interviews, possibly also including focus group interviews, with both staff and leading community activists of an organization based in the coal-producing areas of Central Appalachia. Data collection and analysis will also include participant observation in local county-based chapters, statewide strategy committees, face-to-face and internet-based popular education workshops. There will also be document analysis of the workshop curriculum and the educational literature including what is available on the website. Three or four just transition strategies will be explored and comparatively analyzed; these strategies will likely consist of a community energy project, a couple federal legislative campaigns (including the RECLAIM Act, H.R. 315, and Federal Black Lung Program, and possibly the Green New Deal, H.Res 109), reform of rural electric cooperatives in East Kentucky, and New Power electoral organizing/non-partisan voter empowerment. This research will serve to fill in some of the gap in literature at this moment of transition affecting all of us due to global climate change.

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