

Labour and Environmental Sustainability

**Literature Review – UK and
International Texts**

by
Ania Zbyszewska

agreement!

A Green Mentality for Collective Bargaining

A EU research project led by

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Agreement – A Green Mentality for Collective Bargaining aims at investigating how and why collective bargaining can contribute to embed the principle of environmental sustainability into labour relations, without abandoning but reinvigorating the ideals of justice, equality and democracy that justify the traditional and selective goals of the EU social model and collective bargaining regulation. The research project is based on the idea that there is no contradiction between environmental sustainability and the fundamental ideals and functions of labour law and industrial relations. The project covers 6 EU countries: France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK.

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Scientific coordinator:

Juan Escribano Gutiérrez, Universidad de Almería
jescriba@ual.es

Project coordinator:

Paolo Tomassetti, ADAPT
paolo.tomassetti@adapt.it

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Introduction

The literature on the labour/environment nexus in the United Kingdom (UK) (and to some extent in other English speaking countries, i.e. US and Canada), revolves around four key themes:

1. Exploring possibilities of coalitions between workers and environmental activists;
2. Examining the role of workers as environmental actors, and typologies of approaches that the labour movement and individual unions have taken on environmental sustainability and related issues (i.e. climate adaptation, just transition, etc.);
3. Limitations of eco-modernization and green growth (neoliberal) approaches to sustainability, and alternative proposals for approaches that more fundamentally challenge the capitalist relations of production;
4. Policy and educational materials on greening the workplace and green collective bargaining; primarily produced by the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Possibilities of coalitions

Scholars writing on the labour/environment nexus tend to agree that coalitions between workers and environmentalists are not only possible and needed for successful sustainability transition/climate adaptation, but also desirable for labour movements' renewal, and reinstatement of its broader social relevance'. Accordingly, most reject the notion that there is some a priori and “unavoidable trade-off between environmental protection and working-class material interests”². Instead, they deem the “jobs versus environment” oppositional discourse as politically constructed; and, indeed one that the mainstream environmentalism and unionism have themselves historically helped to reinforce³.

* I would like to thank Marie Pillon for excellent research assistance.

¹ M. MASON, N. MORTER, *Trade unions as environmental actors: The UK transport and general workers' union*, in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 1998, vol. 9, n. 2; D. SNELL, P. FAIRBROTHER, AND A. HART, *Blue-green alliances: Union capacities and prospects as environmental actors*, in S. LOCKIE et al. (eds.) *The Future of Sociology*, Canberra, Australia, 2009, 1-13; N. RÄTHZEL, D. UZZELL (eds.), *Trade unions in the green economy: Working for the environment*, Routledge, 2013; C. LIPSIG-MUMME (ed.), *Work in a Warming World*. McGill-Queens University Press, 2015.

² L. SAVAGE, D. SORON, *Organized Labor and the Politics of Nuclear Energy: The Case of the Canadian Nuclear Workers Council*, in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 2011, vol. 22, n. 3, 8-29.

³ L. SAVAGE, D. SORON, *op. cit.*

While making a case for common ground between the two movements, Foster⁴, for example, charges liberal environmentalism with a failure to engage with class, and interests of ordinary people. He urges that establishing a meaningful coalition between the two movements will require environmentalists to develop a much broader political program that “addresses the social and material needs of workers at the same time that it strives to protect the natural environment”⁵. Similarly, as Savage and Soron⁶ have pointed out with reference to previous literature, labour movements have often shown an instrumental and contradictory disposition towards “nature” or environment, even when they have attempted to integrate ecological goals and perspectives into their strategies. This is because labour unions have pragmatically allied themselves with capital around issues of growth, economic success, and perpetuation of an (capitalist) economic system that is inherently predisposed towards ecological destruction⁷.

Thus, to build coalitions, the two movements have to become more cognizant of, and attempt to incorporate, each other’s values and interests. Some authors have advocated a “marriage of convenience”, or strategic alignment between value-oriented or morally grounded claims (of environmentalists) and those that are more interest-oriented and materially grounded (of workers)⁸. As is explored in section 2, this sort of strategic partnership underpins contemporary labour-environmental coalitions or responses based on ecological modernisation. As is explored in section 3, more transformative or deeper bases for coalition building have also been proposed. These latter models tend to challenge growth-oriented capitalism and embrace broader socio-ecological interests (beyond those of workers and ‘nature’) including those of people located in distant places or future generations.

⁴ J. BELLAMY FOSTER, *Marx’ Ecology in Historical Perspective* in *International Socialism Journal*, 2002, no. 96; J. BELLAMY FOSTER, *Marx’ Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. NYU Press, 2000.

⁵ D. SORON, *John Bellamy Foster: Ecology, Capitalism and the Socialization of Nature - An Interview with John Bellamy Foster* in *Aurora Online*, issue 2004.

⁶ L. SAVAGE, D. SORON, *op. cit.*

⁷ L. SAVAGE, D. SORON, *op. cit.*, with references to V. SILVERMAN, *Green unions in a grey world: Labor environmentalism and international relations*, in *Organization and Environment* 2006, vol. 19, n. 2, 193; A. HAYDEN, *Sharing the work, sparing the planet: Work time, consumption, & ecology*. Toronto: Zed Books, 1999; A. SCHNAIBERG, *The environment: From surplus to scarcity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980; B.K. OBACH, *Labor and the Environmental Movement: The Quest for Common Ground*, MIT Press, 2004; see also P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, Routledge, 2015; M. MASON, N. MORTER, *op. cit.*

⁸ i.e. B.K. OBACH, *Labor-Environmental relations: An analysis of the relationship between labor unions and environmentalists*, in *Social Science Quarterly* 2002, vol. 83 n.1, 82-100; D. JAKOPOVICH, *Uniting to Win: Labor-Environmental Alliances*, in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 2009, vol. 20, n. 2, 74-96.

Workers and unions as environmental actors – typologies of approaches

As some literature illustrates, workers and labour movements are not only potential, but already active environmental actors⁹. In the UK, workers have engaged with ecological issues since the 19th century¹⁰, even if they have often deemed “nature” as its other¹¹. Hampton¹² and Mason and Morter¹³ cite a range of examples of environmentally-informed labour activism, including pro-ecological proposals incorporated into workers’ plans in response to employer restructuring (in 1970s, i.e. the Lucas Aerospace Corporate Plan), union activism and commitments to combat pollution and contamination, lobbying for new environmental regulations, and redefining health and safety in ecological fashion (1980 and 1990s), and the more recent policy and capacity building efforts (conferences, climate and environment networks, newsletters, training) by the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) and individual unions in relation to climate change adaptation and energy transition¹⁴. At the same time, British trade unions have faced significant constraints, given that their power significantly reduced in the post 1979 climate of anti-union policies¹⁵.

Several types of labour approach/positioning on ecological or sustainability issues have been identified, often with reference to broader climate change and environmental sustainability discourses on the one hand, and varieties of unionism on the other. Rätzzel and Uzzell¹⁶, for example, have offered a synthesis of the conceptual or discursive frames that international unions (e.g. ITUC) use to articulate their climate politics. These are: technological fix, social transformation, mutual interest and social movement. While the first two frames are distinguished from each other by the extent of change they need necessary for sustainability (technological change, or more substantial social transformational), the latter two vary as to the breadth of interests that have to be considered and balanced in context of possible adaptation (those of workers and those of broader society).

In relation to the UK, Hampton¹⁷ draws on Hyman’s¹⁸ 2001 typology of unionism based on the market, society, and class affinities, to predict what sort of

⁹ R. FELLI, *An Alternative Socio-ecological Strategy? International Trade Unions’ Engagement with Climate Change*, in *Review of International Political Economy*, iFirst, 2013, citing pertinent literature.

¹⁰ P. HAMPTON, *op. cit.*

¹¹ N. RÄTHZEL, D. UZZELL, *Mending the breach between labor and nature: a case for environmental labor studies*, in N. RÄTHZEL, D. UZZELL (eds.), *Trade Unions in the Green Economy*. Routledge, 2013, 1-12.

¹² P. HAMPTON, *op. cit.*; P. HAMPTON, *Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?*, in *Globalizations*, 2018, vol. 15, n. 4, 470-486.

¹³ M. MASON, N. MORTER, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ See also M. MASON, N. MORTER, *op. cit.*; D. JAKOPOVICH, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ M. MASON, N. MORTER, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ N. RÄTHZEL, D. UZZELL, *Trade Unions and Climate Change: The Jobs versus Environment Dilemma*, in *Global Environmental Change* 2001, vol. 21, n. 4, 1215-1223.

¹⁷ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, *cit.*

environmental actors particular types of unions are likely to be, and what type of climate solidarity they might exhibit (note that Rätzzel and Uzzell also draw on Hyman to develop their typology). He suggests that unions that adopt the business unionism (market) approach are more likely to subscribe to *neoliberal climate change discourse* and view climate change as a market issue (and one of competitiveness, profitability and employment), which can be resolved through market measures (e.g. emissions trading). These unions, he claims, will tend to prioritize jobs and accommodate the needs of firms vis-à-vis sustainability concerns. By contrast, those unions that gravitate towards the social integrationist approach are more likely to embrace the discourse of *ecological modernization*, with pursuit of co-benefits for social partners but also with concern for wider social justice impacts of climate change and adaptation (e.g. higher fuel costs). They are more likely to look to the state for solutions (and accommodate the state) such as active industrial policy that promotes low-carbon technologies and new green jobs. Finally, those unions that take a more explicitly class-conscious approach are likely to be most critical to the existing neoliberal or modernization approaches to climate change adaptation and instead propose *more radical and transformative alternatives*, often in alliance with other social movements (and with no trust in states or markets).

The three positions that Hampton¹⁹ identifies, are also largely consistent with the study by Lewis and Juravle's²⁰ of the discursive framings articulated by climate champions, who in the UK are employees given voluntary, unpaid but semi-official climate watchdog role by the employer. In relation to how climate change ought to be addressed, Lewis and Juravle found that these champions responded that: 1) free markets will solve the problem, 2) advocated for government intervention; 3) or expressed a 'dissenter' view pointing out that interests are inherently competing and as such easy resolution is not easy. Another study of the climate champions cited by Hampton²¹, by Swaffield and Bell²², found that these champions consistently failed to challenge limits that neoliberalism imposes on how we tackle problem of climate change.

As Hampton²³ shows, the neoliberal and eco-modernization perspectives are presently hegemonic in the UK; also among the unions²⁴. This is largely consistent

¹⁸ R. HYMAN, *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class & Society*. London: Sage, 2001.

¹⁹ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, cit.

²⁰ A. LEWIS, C. JURAVLE, *Morals, Markets and Sustainable Investments: A Qualitative Study of "Champions"*, in *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2010, vol. 93, n. 3, 483-94, cited in P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, cit.

²¹ P. HAMPTON, *Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?*, cit.

²² J. SWAFFIELD, D. BELL, *Can 'climate champions' save the planet? A critical reflection on neoliberal social change*, in *Environmental Politics*, 2012, vol. 21, n. 2, 248-267.

²³ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, cit.

²⁴ See also M. MASON, N. MORTER, *op. cit.*

with the approach across the European Union (EU). Stefania Barca²⁵, for example, notes the ‘ecological modernization’ approach as the one preferred by organized labour at the EU-level, as represented by the ETUC and social democrat groups active within the European Parliament. Likewise, trade unions in Canada have been shown to prefer ‘ecoliberalism’ and ‘green new dealism’ in responding to climate change²⁶. The Just Transition approach promoted by the international labour movement and currently taken up at the policy level (by the ILO, among others) also falls into the eco-modernization category, although it does incorporate the social justice dimension by focusing on interests of workers but also the communities to which they belong²⁷.

Critique of eco-modernization approach

An alternative to the mainstream ecological modernization is what Stefania Barca²⁸ refers to as the ‘environmental justice’ approach, and Hampton²⁹ identifies as a Marxist approach to climate justice that is more actively aligned with class politics. For Barca, this is an approach associated with radical post-development global movements galvanized around a critique of mainstream economy based on growth, and re-claiming the commons as a political terrain for anti-capitalist politics; actions, which she notes are not inspired by escapism but a *nowtopia* attitude (with reference to Giorgos Kallis, a degrowth scholar). Concretely, actions including advocacy for reduced working hours, re-commoning public services, reducing unnecessary material and energy consumption, re-localising production, democratic control of the economy, decentralised energy systems, and the union’s participation in anti-fracking and similar mobilisations at the grassroots local level exemplify this approach.

For Hampton, the more radical alternative to UK unions’ current focus on ecological modernization is the Marxist approach of “sustainable communism”:

Ultimately, a Marxist approach suggests that a society based on collective democratic control over publicly-owned resources, as well as significant changes to the labour process (including working time and workers’ control), would provide more rational social relations of production for avoiding climate change. A socialist system of ‘sustainable communism’ is the most appropriate structure for restoring the social-climate metabolism. Such a system could only result from working-class self-emancipation. ... While

²⁵ S. BARCA, *Labour and the ecological crisis: The eco-modernist dilemma in western Marxism(s) (1970s-2000s)*, in *Geoforum*, 2017.

²⁶ J.P. NUGENT, *Changing the Climate: Ecoliberalism, Green New Dealism, and the Struggle over Green Jobs in Canada*, in *Labor Studies Journal*, 2011, vol. 36 n.1, 58–82, cited in R. FELLI, *op. cit.*

²⁷ S. BARCA, *op. cit.*

²⁸ S. BARCA, *op. cit.*

²⁹ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, *cit.*

this ‘utopian’ goal remains valid, no existing state currently fulfils these criteria, for socialism or for sustainability”³⁰.

As Hampton shows the TUC and other UK unions have shown some elements of class politics in their sustainability policies and politics, such as in the context of its critical stance on fossil fuels, especially its opposition to fracking, commitment to adaptation, focusing on the distributional consequences of climate policy, some limited interventions aimed at public ownership of certain industries and natural resources, and mobilization of union members for protests³¹. At the same time, their activism on this issue has significantly declined since the 2016 changes to the Trade Unions Act, introduced by the Conservative government³².

TUC’s policy and capacity building work

In the UK, the TUC has produced a significant body of material on sustainability, climate adaptation, and just transition³³. This includes policy and campaign materials setting out its stance on key issues, as well as educational and training manuals aimed at building capacity among workers and trade union representatives, and to prepare them for collective bargaining on sustainability issues. Among others, the TUC produced guides explaining why unions should be involved, information and sample arguments that they can make to convince companies to go green, instructions on how to set up workplace (and joint) environmental committees and sample joint climate change agreements.³⁴

TUC surveys³⁵ found that workplace committees were set up and environmental representatives established at a small number of workplaces in both, private and public sectors (e.g. EDF, South Thames College, Bristol City Council, Western Power Distribution), and that unions had successfully negotiated agreements with

³⁰ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, cit., chapter 7.

³¹ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, cit.

³² P. HAMPTON, *Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?*, cit.

³³ P. HAMPTON, *Workers and Trade Unions for Climate Solidarity*, cit.; Id., *Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?*, cit., reviews these in detail.

³⁴ Some of the key examples include: *Go Green at Work – A Practical Handbook for Trade Union Green Representatives*, TUC <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/gogreenatwork.pdf>; *Changing Work in a Changing Climate*, TUC, 2009: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/adaptation.pdf>; *The Union Effect: Greening the Workplace*, TUC, 2014: https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/The_Union_Effect_Greening_The_Workplace_Covers_2_014_All.pdf; *Targeting Climate Change: A TUC Education Workbook for Trade Unionists*: https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tucfiles/tuc_targeting_climate_change.pdf; *Greener Deals: Negotiating on Environmental Issues at Work*: https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/greener_deals.pdf.

³⁵ LABOUR RESEARCH DEPARTMENT, *Unions and Climate Change – the Case for Union Environmental Reps*, 2009 and LABOUR RESEARCH DEPARTMENT, *Green Unions at Work 2012*, 2012, cited in P. HAMPTON, *Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?*, cit.

their employers on environmental matters. The surveys also found that union representatives who wanted to do environmental work used whatever forms of representation were available:

Just over half (55%) of respondents were union representatives or stewards, while one-in-five were safety representatives. Only 4% defined themselves solely as environment representatives. They also made use of existing structures to negotiate collectively with management, with joint management-union health and safety committee being the most popular forum for discussing climate-related issues and around a third of the representatives taking part in some sort of organized structure.

Indeed, some people joined the union specifically because they wanted to be environmental reps. However, the survey also reported that:

15% of representatives reported that they had other difficulties in taking up climate change in the workplace, while about 4% said they had been refused time off to attend union training on climate change and environment. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the representatives said they did not have facility time for environmental work. Employment relations on climate issues were not uniformly harmonious but subject to the pressures of consent and coercion.

Overall, Hampton³⁶ found that despite TUC's active engagement and significant effort to build capacity, train and get recognition for union environmental representatives, in practice, only a small number of activists within individual unions engaged in campaigning on climate-related issues. He attributes this low take up to the model of industrial relations that tends to mobilize workers around industrial action and conflicts, rather than cooperation and partnership. The TUC surveys he cites indicated that environmental reps struggled with non-cooperative management positions, and noted that the benefits of implementing green policies were not distributed to workers. He also notes that limited funding (this was not really a priority for the Labour government that was in administration before 2010; and it never enshrined the rights of environmental reps in legislation, as it promised) for the initiatives meant that only those really committed to them carried on. He also notes the decline in interest to, among others, the political factors: 2010 and 2015 elections of conservative governments, the new restrictions on union facility time, ballot thresholds, and strikes introduced by the 2016 Trade Union Act, and the Brexit vote.

³⁶ P. HAMPTON, *Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?*, cit.