

## **How to protect jobs as well as the environment? Trade union's environmental policies**

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### **1. The question**

Despite the impact of climate change on the production process and thus on work, research in this area is scarce. While technological solutions are investigated and there is ample literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), trade unions, one of the principal social actors in the production process, have been largely ignored (But see, Labour Studies Journal 2011). If they are addressed, they are represented as standing in the way of climate change measures. While they might have been slow in placing climate change their agenda, environmental movements have been slow in recognising the legitimacy of workers' interests in defending their jobs.

In this paper we want to present some results from a research project on trade unions environmental policies in different countries. We concentrate on four discourses within international unions, which aim to reconcile the protection of jobs with the protection of the environment.

### **2. Interviewing Trade Unions**

The methods employed were a desktop analysis of trade union policy statements, participant observation at conferences, and in-depth interviews with senior trade union officials and senior members of national and international organisations that interact with the trade union movement. Forty-three interviews were conducted with in Brazil, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, India, and the UK, as well as with officials of international federations in Brussels, Geneva, London, Delhi and Paris. The interviews were conducted between March 2009 and December 2010, and in July 2012 in India. They lasted between 1½ - 2 hours. Anonymity was guaranteed, which is why we cannot describe the place and position of our interviewees in detail and why all names in this text are pseudonyms.

Our interviewees were high-level trade union officials whose portfolio was 'the environment'. Their views did not necessarily represent the general view of trade unions, nor probably the majority view of the members within their union. However, they can be regarded as the opinion leaders on issues of climate change within their unions and partly in the international union movement, which is why their positions are worth examining. They enable us to understand in which directions trade union environmental policies might be developing.

### **3. Jobs vs. Environment – discourses challenging the dilemma**

One of our informants claimed that it is the neglect of environmental concerns that is historically new for unions:

Rainer D.: *“It’s quite interesting, because if you look back in history, trade unions were some of the first environmentalists. We were the first ones that made the link between the workplace and the local community. So when you look back in the industrial revolution it was the trade unions that were saying, ‘Hang on a minute, these rivers are polluted, and our families are getting sick.’”*

Rainer D. is referring to the early days when unions created “organizations to advocate and develop gender equality, consumers’ interests (the cooperative movement), popular health and welfare, housing, culture in all its aspects, education, leisure activities, and human rights (including anti-colonial movements)” (Gallin, 2000:4). Re-connecting to this tradition paves the way for unions to engage in climate change policies:

Rainer D.: *“And I think what the whole debate in Copenhagen and this process is doing is meaning that the trade unions really are having to redevelop the role that they used to have, that we need to take a much louder position on this whole issue.”*

Rainer D.’s suggestion can be understood within a framework of movement unionism that has not been prominent within many European unions to date. But even this model is not necessarily free of the error that Marx pointed out in his 1875 critique of the Gotha Programme of the German Socialist Party, which stated that labour is the source of all wealth. Marx criticised this position, arguing: “Labor is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (...) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power.” (Marx, 1983). Defining work, Marx emphasized the essential role of nature: “The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*.” (Marx, 1988:72, emphasis in original). In the labour movement’s history, the connection between nature and labour has rarely been made. One reason being that natural resources used in the production process are privately owned and therefore considered as being outside the reach of workers. In the following we present four discourses aiming to reconcile environmental and job protection.

### *3.1 There is no conflict – the “technological fix” perspective*

Some of our interviewees did not think there was a conflict between protecting jobs and protecting the environment.

Rainer D.: *So what our role is – and this is how it links very closely with the South – is we need to make sure that there is the best available technology in new plants that open in developing countries. We also need to make sure that there is a technology transfer between plants in the North and the South. There was a report that was produced by the International Energy Agency, which was key on steel, which said that if you took the best technology there is today and you replicated that through every plant in the world, you would reduce the emissions from the steel producers by over 50.*

The perspective Rainer D. offers represents the view that a low carbon economy can be realised *through* economic growth. Technological innovation appears as a solution that combines the best of both worlds: it protects an industry by modernising it and protects the

environment by reducing emissions. There is a problem with the technological fix, though: even when reducing emissions does not imply cutting workplaces but renewing their technology, this still means that jobs will be lost due to the higher productivity achieved through better technology. Redundancies could only be avoided by two means: either by increasing production levels which would increase emissions again, or by reducing working hours, which would have the threefold positive effect of reducing unemployment, reducing emissions, and increasing life quality (Schor, 2010). However, this second alternative would imply large societal changes. There is not technological fix without social implications.

### *3.2 Beyond the technological fix: social transformation*

If workers are not to become the victims of technological change, technological and social transformations need to go hand in hand. Julio, responsible for environmental policies in a European union, argues.

*Julio: "For example, the social problem of (...) road transport - it's not easy. The position of the driver is a real position in society. When you are a driver, you do not have a high qualification but you have a real job — and you have real recognition. (...) You have a real identification. Because when you are a (...) young boy, you play with a car, and you hope to become a driver. (...) It's not a technical problem. We know the technical problem perfectly well now. (...) We need to change the social image and the population.*

Julio is arguing that most workers aim to do "a job well for its own sake" (Sennett, 2008: 9). Work gives people a sense of purpose and implies a specific 'way of life': adventure and independence in the case of the truck driver. Apart from the satisfaction derived from work, jobs also provide, what Julio calls a "position in society": identities are not merely individual. The lorry driver connotes a specific masculinity associated with a certain technology. Its qualities are relational: they make sense in opposition to images of a femininity, regarded as estranged from technology. Transition programmes in the past have predominantly focused on re-training workers for new professions in new areas. They usually don't take into account that work is an important anchoring place of people's identities. Therefore, in addition to possible material insecurities changing jobs also threatens people's identities (Breakwell, 1986). Campaigns for "green jobs", if they are to be successful, need to consider how green jobs might challenge collective representations of work, images of masculinity/femininity, manual/mental work, of worthwhile and empowering jobs. Campaigns labelling coal, steel, or chemical industries as "dirty" can alienate workers in those sectors from thinking about climate change measures, since they feel their identities and pride as workers are threatened.

### *3.3 The legitimacy of immediate interests: when workers talk to each other instead of being talked to*

Since different parts of the economy have different impacts on climate change, the positions of unions differ according to the sectors in which they are organising workers. In the transport workers' union, which organises road, maritime and aviation workers across the public and private sectors, the conflict between jobs and environment translates into tensions between members of different kinds of transport. Public transport workers (i.e. rail and busses) tend to be in favour of environmental policies, while road and aviation workers

are more reluctant. Sara from the ETF explained, “*Transport is in Europe the single sector where CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are still increasing. 25% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are coming from transport*”. The ‘Trade Union Vision on Sustainable Transport Project’ (ETF, 2008) addresses this issue while simultaneously trying to overcome the frictions between its different groups of members. Like Joel, Sara told us about the identity of the road worker as an independent worker. In internal debates railway workers would say to road transport workers:

*Sara: Is it really in the interest of long-distance freight transport workers to stay away from home two weeks, one week even, when we have a transport system where we say the long distance for inland waterways, rail, and short sea shipping or so? And then you always have the last mile, as it’s called, and this will remain road transport. Can’t we have a joint vision on this, also from the interest point of view of workers? And we know that when workers are young it’s maybe even... Well, in the past there was this feeling of independence.*

The key word here is *workers’ interest*. Interests are conventionally defined in opposition to values, morality, and ethics. While the latter are seen as guiding principles for all humans, interests are usually regarded as dividing a community, as standing in contradiction to morality and ethics. Ethics can be understood as prescriptions, referring to a common humanity. Ethics can therefore obscure the power relations dividing humanity. In contrast, negotiating interests allows for transparency. It enables a discussion about the legitimacy of interests, their relation to each other, and their generalisability.

In our transport example, negotiating interests permits a discussion about the relationship between conflicting interests people hold simultaneously (being at home and being independent on the road) and about their relation to other interests – protecting the environment, or the interests of other fellow workers. In contrast, a debate about the morality of an act can create a smoke screen of generality behind which different interests and their questionable legitimacy become invisible.

Sara’s account shows how interests are linked with identities. The feeling of independence constitutes the interests of the workers to drive their trucks. However, the same drivers may also identify as lovers, husbands, and fathers. The transport workers’ union tries to convince their truck driving members to agree to an environmentally sound transport system by appealing to this last set of interests, which is more in tune with the interests of creating a sustainable transport system.

The sustainable transport programme developed by the ITF makes a link between environmental, healthier working conditions, better qualifications, a better quality of life, and more cooperative relationships enabling relations of mutual solidarity instead of competition (ITF, 2010). That is, it connects workers’ interests with a care for nature.

### 3.4 General interests

The immediate interests of workers concerning their work and families, however, are not necessarily identical with what some of our informants called ‘the general interests of the workers’.

Julio E.: (...) *for the trade unions the priority is to defend employees, to defend the working conditions, but also to defend the general interest. And the debate inside about the general interest – the resolution of the debate is very interesting.*

The general interest of workers transcends the defence of their working conditions. It is an interest that is not immediately obvious, otherwise there would not be the need for an internal debate. For Julio E., broadening the definition of workers' interests implies broadening the unions' strategy to develop alternatives to the existing forms of production. Although the trade union campaign for "Green Jobs" points in that direction, it focuses on pressurising industry and government. Julio E. suggests that what is also needed is a willingness of unions to see themselves as inventors of alternative forms of production based on the knowledge and skills of their members on the shop floor (see the Lucas Aerospace conversion programme (1972-76) in: Wainwright and Elliott (1982); Räthzel, Uzzell, & Elliott (2010), Henriksson 2012).

#### 4. Perspectives

We have outlined four discourses in which the conflicting relationship between jobs and environment is conceptualised by unionists. The first, the *'technological fix' discourse* does not address the societal context in which technological innovations are embedded.

The second, the *'social transformation' discourse* proposes a comprehensive policy in which environmental protection and societal change are interconnected. Workers' fears of losing their jobs are understood in broader terms, acknowledging that people develop their identities through work and therefore transforming production must take into account socially constructed images of work and professions, including social power relations.

The third the *'immediate interests' discourse* focuses on the legitimacy of workers' interests, and enters into a horizontal dialogue with workers about how their immediate interests can be re-defined and *reconciled* with rather than *replaced by* environmental altruism. Instead of an abstract morality it focuses on transparent interests, cooperation and solidarity.

The fourth discourse can be coined the *'social movement' discourse*. It includes workers' immediate interests but places them within a broader notion of 'general interests'. Unions are defined as actors in the production process, whose role is not only to defend jobs but also to question the given forms of production and develop alternatives that include societal transformations. It conceptualises unions as representing not only the interests of workers at work, but in society at large.

All four discourses aim to tear down the invisible wall that exists between workers in workplaces and workers as citizens outside work. Thus, they are not mutually exclusive since they all imply a re-invention of unions as social movements, even if this is only articulated explicitly in the last discourse.

Returning to Marx' critique of the Gotha programme, which excluded nature as a source of wealth, our results show that this exclusion is still active. In all discourses nature was conceptualised as something that provides a quality of life and health for workers; it was not understood as an ally in the production process. The discourse of interests, even in its broadest sense, reaches its limits when it comes to nature. Interests have to be articulated, defined and fought for by social groups; 'nature' cannot articulate its own interests. To talk about the environment instead of nature has the problem to see nature as a container of human work and life. It obscures the necessary interaction between humans, human nature and the external nature.

There was one moment during our interviews, where the term nature was used by a unionist in South Africa: *"So, you know, it's all the concepts about what's happening in the metabolic rift between nature and humans."* This sentence opens up a new perspective, the *relationship* between humans and nature. The notion of the 'metabolic rift' refers to Liebig's concept used by Marx. They argued that the separation of town and country, together with the implementation of monocultures, destroyed the exchange between human nature and nature.

It is through labour, through the transformation of nature, that humans develop their own nature, their capabilities. To recognise this would connect the need to take care for nature in its own right with workers' interests of developing their capabilities through cooperation with nature. An insight into this process might generate a view in which workers can think of themselves as allies of nature, not as its exploiters. Should such a view become prominent it would imply a decisive shift in existing climate change policies in which nature remains subordinated to a narrowly defined economy.

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