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JUST TRANSITION – A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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JULIA EDER, HALLIKI KREININ, FLORIAN WUKOVITSCH
Introduction: Just Transition – A Global Perspective

The looming ecological crisis calls for urgent action and profound social, economic and political changes, including the challenging of established institutions, behaviours and norms – especially in the field of work (IPCC 2022). Global societies in the industrialised North have so far failed to transform their production and consumption systems to function within the planetary boundaries (Steffen et al. 2015; Richardson et al. 2023; Rockström et al. 2009), because there are vested interests in maintaining the status quo, while workers' welfare is tied to the continuation of productivist systems through wage labour – facilitating the so-called 'jobs blackmail' (Barca 2019). Labour and capital have historically formed two sides of the modern industrial capitalist model of production, which, although no longer sustainable, has also brought material benefits to workers: social peace between capital and labour has been bought by increasing material wealth at the expense of the environment, as well as of labour and nature elsewhere (Galgóczi 2020; Keil/Kreinin 2022; Schnaiberg 1980).

Transforming the current socio-economic system to live within planetary limits requires a fundamental transformation of the modern industrial capitalist production model. It depends on both the liberation of labour from the jobs blackmail and on setting limits to the expansion of capital accumulation on the back of labour and nature (Barca 2015; 2019). Promoting structural change towards ecological sustainability affects the economic structures of production and the workers employed in the sectors that need to be transformed, downsized or phased out, as well as their communities. For deep social transformation to be accepted, the material 'survival' interests of workers must be taken into account. The history of social progress (e.g., child labour laws) in industrialised coun-

tries shows that transforming the exploitative business logic of the productivist economic system requires strict government policies to limit the exploitation of both labour and nature (Rätzzel/Uzzell 2009).

Climate action will only be successful if social impacts are considered holistically, and vice versa. From a historical perspective, this includes climate justice (a fair and equitable distribution of the burdens of addressing the climate crisis, as well as the inclusion and protection of the rights of the most vulnerable to its effects) and global production conditions, as well as past and present power and dependency relations. The core question is, therefore: how can the costs of the climate crisis be shared fairly and respectfully among humanity, in space and time, but also with respect to other species and the environment? In order to avoid increasing social inequality and deprivation, as well as sharply rising regional disparities that could accompany any transformation(s) towards greater sustainability, trade unions have developed ideas on how a 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy could take place, as there is a growing recognition within the labour movement that addressing the environmental crises requires deep changes (Galgóczi 2020). However, unions have historically also varied in their positions on issues around just transition, as, in particular, unions representing carbon-intensive industries have prioritised job security and expressed concerns about rapid change (Keil/Kreinin 2022; Kreinin 2021).

Just transition originally emerged in the North American trade union movement as a response to the burgeoning environmental movement, and as a way of addressing tensions between environmental and socio-economic goals in specific regions and communities (Galgóczi 2020; Snell 2018; Stevis/Felli 2015). The initial focus of just transition was on securing the livelihoods of workers within existing wage labour-based welfare systems in the transition to low-carbon economies, in other words on job losses in a handful of developed countries, rather than challenging the productivist logic at the heart of environmental crises more broadly (McCauley/Heffron 2018). It converged on more localised environmental problems, such as local chemical pollution from continued industrial production, and localised welfare solutions to the closure of industries, such as ensuring state funding for worker retraining and investment in jobs in new sustainable sectors (Snell 2018; Stevis/Felli 2015).

After the birth of just transition in the 1960s and 1970s, the concept was revived in the 1990s and 2000s as the environmental crisis came into sharper focus. While continuing to be an important reference point for the trade union movement, just transition has been taken up by various other actors such as NGOs, IGOs, companies, civil society organisations and governments. This has led to some contestation over the concrete meaning of just transition and generated competing, sometimes even contradictory, understandings of just transition (Clarke/Lipsig-Mummé; 2020; Kalt, 2021; Kyriazi/Miró, 2023). For example, the European Commission included a just transition mechanism in its European Green Deal agenda, which aims for green growth (European Commission, n.d.; Kyriazi/Miró, 2023), while more radical definitions moved “from a simple call for job creation in the green economy to a radical critique of capitalism and rejection of market solutions” (Barca 2015: 392). Thus, while the primary focus on labour markets and paid employment as the core domain of welfare has been maintained, the scope of the concept has broadened significantly over time (Stavis/Felli 2015; Barca 2015).

Discrepancies in the strategic mobilisation of justice claims have revolved around what justice entails, for example, whether there exists a right to unsustainable lifestyles in the Global North. Another fundamental question related to this issue is that of who deserves justice. Is it people in the Global North, people in the Global South, or both? Which groups in society need to be considered separately? Do we want justice only for the present or also for future generations? And, does our understanding of justice encompass only humans or also other species (Kalt, 2021; Evans/Phelan 2016)? While it has been suggested that the lack of a single definition may provide the necessary flexibility to tailor the term to specific circumstances in order to effectively translate theory into practice (Snell 2018), it has also been easily co-opted by business and fossil fuel interests (and sometimes the trade unions aligned with these industries) as a means of delaying climate action (Evans/Phelan 2016; Kalt 2021). Indeed, both RWE (the German energy giant) and Royal Dutch Shell PLC – among the 100 companies most responsible for fossil fuel emissions (Griffin 2017) – claim to be fighting for a just transition, while at the same time funding climate denial (Franta 2021b; 2021a).

In response to these challenges of co-optation, researchers have suggested the need to refocus just transition on issues of (1) distributional, (2) procedural and (3) restorative justice, in other words, by focusing on the equitable distribution of both the benefits and burdens associated with transitioning, making sure that communities affected are included in decision-making, and repairing the historical and ongoing harms caused by unsustainable practices (McCauley/Heffron, 2018). Although transformative just transition narratives that integrate labour and climate justice demands are urgently needed, very few actors have made such broad just transition demands (Kalt 2021). Many unions in the Global North have referred to both distributive and procedural forms of justice but have struggled more so with restorative justice demands.

The notion of just transition has also clearly entered the academic debate. In addition to review articles and analytical contributions, some of which are cited in the opening paragraphs of this introduction, there exists a growing number of case studies of concrete experiences of just transition. These tend to focus on the management of structural change in a particular region or industry, but the shifts in the transnational division of labour and the implications for different actors in the Global South (or European peripheries) are currently understudied. For example, in their paper “Just Transition in the European automotive industry – insights from the affected stakeholder”, Demitry et al. (2022) discuss four challenges – or gaps – that emerge in the transition to electric mobility in the European automotive industry. The first gap, although referred to as the “geographical gap”, only highlights the different levels of adaptation pressure that regions in Europe will face (Demitry et al. 2022: 21-22). The Global South is not considered.

The Western centrism of just transition can be traced back to the concept’s origins in the Northern trade union movement. The focus was on affected workers in specific extractive or manufacturing industries and individual production sites in the Global North. Solidarity often stopped at national or, sometimes, European borders. The impact of the transition on workers along the value chain and other actors, e.g., in extractive industries, often in other regions of the world, was usually ignored. A broader global shift towards sustainability and against the exploitation of labour

and nature includes an understanding of the need to stay within planetary limits, while avoiding “green sacrifice zones” that harm labour and the environment in the global South for the “greening” of the North (Kalt 2021; Krause et al. 2022; Zografos and Robbins 2020).

This special issue aims to contribute to the ongoing debate in the trade union movement and academia by broadening the understanding of what it means to take a ‘global perspective’ on just transition, and how current concepts of ‘just transition’ could be adapted or expanded to address transnational labour solidarity and reduce global inequality.

Dimitris Stevis, J. Mijin Cha, Vivian Price and Todd E. Vachon present findings from the Just Transition Listening Project, launched in early 2020 by the Labor Network for Sustainability, a U.S.-based nonprofit that promotes worker environmentalism. The project aims to build an empirical database of just transition experiences in the United States. For the paper, they analyse seven different just transition cases in terms of breadth (what and who is covered), depth (socio-ecological goals, i.e. maintaining the status quo vs. pursuing reformist or transformative objectives) and ambition (modest or far-reaching changes). Using community-engaged oral history as a methodological basis, and relying on interviews, they document the lived experiences of working people. This provides analytical insights into the study of the varieties of just transitions, ranging from single-issue approaches to broader political change. While Initiative 1631 in Washington State was about establishing the first state-level carbon fee on emissions in the US, with the revenue going to fund environmental and social programmes, the case of the GM Lordstown plant closure in 2019 focused on finding alternative employment opportunities or minimal support for affected workers.

Rosa Lehmann and Pedro Alarcón challenge the concept of a ‘just transition’ by analysing the political economy and political ecology of Mexico and Ecuador in the context of the climate-driven phase of global capitalism and extractivist relations between the global North and South. They argue that while these countries provide raw materials and energy resources to the global economy, the transition to green technologies reproduces existing inequalities. Mexico and Ecuador are used as empirical examples because of their reliance on fossil fuel extractivism

and reserves of minerals needed for renewable energy technologies. While the authors consider the transition to renewable energy to be important for achieving climate goals, they suggest that it needs to be examined within a framework of justice in terms of energy, climate and environmental concerns – considering the allocation of resources between Global North and South. In the short term, incomplete transition policies in the Global North as well as Europe’s energy crisis are driving countries such as Mexico and Ecuador to continue intensifying fossil fuel extraction in environmentally sensitive regions. ‘Green hydrogen’ for export to the Global North perpetuates economic imbalances and dependency in the Global South, creating new ‘sacrifice zones’ for renewable energy production, and reproducing socio-environmental inequalities. The authors also discuss the role of the state in shaping these transitions, with unresolved questions about (state) financing of the transition, state involvement, and the overall fairness of the process, as well as the phenomenon of rent-seeking and the state’s participation in the e-technology value chain. While state policies are arenas for negotiation and development, there’s growing opposition to resource-driven models due to their negative socio-environmental impacts, with contradictions between the pursuit of national development and global sustainability.

Kristina Dietz and Louisa Prause analyse how the European transition to electric mobility affects workers and other actors in the global production networks linked to the production of electric drive systems (batteries). The authors ask to what extent the transition to alternative propulsion systems contributes to a just mobility transition. They argue that the conventional concept of a just transition needs to be extended in two ways. First, they propose the introduction of a multidimensional conception of justice, including fair distribution, recognition, and participation. Second, they argue that spatial inequalities should be taken into account by addressing different scales and considering the specific roles and embeddedness of actors in global production networks. The focus of their paper is on the commodity dimension of the e-mobility transition. For the transition to climate-neutral propulsion systems, Europe needs a large number of raw materials from countries in the Global South, e.g. copper, nickel, cobalt and lithium. It is therefore important who has access to raw materials and

who controls their extraction in the global and European peripheries. The global energy and mobility transition has the potential to reproduce or even to reinforce global inequality. However, this still depends on how the actors in specific contexts assess and respond to the green commodity boom. Based on their analysis, Dietz and Prause discuss some features that a ‘global just transition’ in the automotive sector would require.

Using the Czech Republic as an illustrative case of the EU’s semi-periphery, Mikuláš Černík, Martin Černý, Patrik Gažo and Eva Fraňková explain how the implementation of EU just transition policies has serious shortcomings in addressing socio-economic and, especially, power inequalities in regions that have been structurally disadvantaged for a long time and where trust in public institutions is relatively low. Going beyond ‘pro forma’ participation, they seek to understand the potential for meaningful participation that would open up a space for balancing the structural inequalities through deliberative processes. They argue that this requires, above all, the participation of large, dispersed groups such as workers in sectors at risk. To this end, they analyse the representation of workers in national and regional stakeholder platforms which are focused on structural changes in the energy system, in particular the phase-out of coal, and find that it was quite minimal and mediated by union representatives. Complementing the analysis of these platforms with insights from previous studies and stakeholder interviews, they identify main challenges to meaningful participation, such as a lack of transparency in the selection of participants, a lack of clarity about how to influence outcomes, and a lack of shared understanding of the overarching goals of a just transition. Based on this, they propose four guiding principles for meaningful participation: accountable stakeholder mapping, inclusion of underrepresented groups, long-term multi-method interaction, and clearly articulated goals throughout. Finally, they argue that meaningful participation is about balancing the roles of experts (e.g., representatives of industry) and non-experts (e.g., workers) in an effort to close the gap in the ability to influence just transition policies, as also suggested by post-normal science.

Martin Černý and Sebastian Luckeneder’s paper illustrates the dilemma of finding alternative job opportunities given a coal mining phase-out, in the context of which other mining sectors and their downstream value chains are often considered. The authors claim that while the

green transition requires a lot of mined materials (so-called energy transition metals and minerals, ETMs), neither are the jobs in such extractive industries nor the corresponding value chains environmentally sustainable. For this reason, they investigate feasible job alternatives beyond the extractive sectors' value chains. They review the just transition strategies of the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Indonesia, and India to understand the extent to which these countries are oriented towards replacing coal mining with ETM extraction and what job replacement strategies are evolving in this context. It turns out that none of these countries emphasises the creation of 'green' jobs in the sense of transitioning away from an economy based on extractive activities, nor is there sufficient commitment to identifying specific job alternatives. Therefore, they have set themselves the task of pinpointing feasible alternatives to coal mining jobs that do not require extensive retraining but could still fall into the category of 'green' jobs, with the most promising options being related to recycling, renewable energy and public transport infrastructure. They conclude that even those just transition strategies that minimise retraining requirements allow moving away from a modernist 'development' paradigm based largely on the primary extraction and processing of natural resources. Moreover, they emphasise that alternatives beyond the extractive sector can open up space for levelling global inequalities, for instance by changing the position of regions in global value chains from resource exporters to more localised economies.

In the final contribution to this special issue, Karin Küblböck and Ines Omann present the research project "AdJUST: Advancing the understanding of challenges, policy options and measures to achieve a just EU energy transition", which is a cooperation between several research institutions and other organisations. The project aims to further develop the concept of a European just transition through incorporating the views of different stakeholders into the process and, based on this, developing a common vision of a just transition. Furthermore, they examine the distributional effects of the transformation on enterprises and workers as well as on households. Finally, they focus on the relevance of institutions and their role in supporting a just transition.

All contributions provide relevant new insights for the deepening and broadening of the debate on how to tackle the global dimension of just

transition. However, there is still much more to consider and explore. We therefore hope that this special issue will stimulate further research on just transition adopting a global perspective.

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