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JUST TRANSITION – A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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DIMITRIS STEVIS, J. MIJIN CHA, VIVIAN PRICE, TODD E. VACHON
Varieties of Just Transitions: Lessons from the Just Transition
Listening Project (US)

Abstract Since 2015 there has been a proliferation of just transition policies and initiatives. As part of the Just Transition Listening Project, launched by the Labor Network for Sustainability in early 2020, we identified seven distinct just transition cases in the USA. The diversity of these cases calls for an analytical scheme that can differentiate amongst just transitions by recognising that a policy, such as a national or transnational Green New Deal, may be promising, but only for some within a country and the world political economy and at the expense of others. This research advances our understanding of the varieties of just transitions currently pursued in one country, the US, but also offers useful and pressing analytical insights into the study of just transitions, whether these transitions are local or transnational.

Keywords just transition, ecosocial coalitions, labour environmentalism, climate justice, community research

I. Introduction

Since 2015 there has been a proliferation of just transition policies and initiatives. While the theoretical, policy, and research agendas of just transition are growing (e.g., Stevis 2023; Vachon 2022; Wang/Lo 2021; Cha et al. 2020; Just Transition Research Collaborative (JTRC) 2018), there is a need for more empirical research on the challenges and experiences of people who face, or have faced, transition. We use the concept of tran-

sitions to encompass meaningful social or economic changes that have a major impact in people's lives, such as plant shutdowns, as well as to consider the broader idea of what is needed to achieve an equitable and sustainable society.

To expand our collective understanding of transitions, the Just Transition Listening Project (JTLP) was launched in 2020 to provide an empirical database of transition experiences from the United States (U.S.). The Project was an initiative of the Labor Network for Sustainability (LNS), a U.S. based non-profit that promotes labour environmentalism through reports, campaigns, and member involvement.¹ The JTLP filled an important gap in the just transition literature by providing testimonials and oral histories from those that have experienced or face imminent employment transition. The effort culminated in a report released in 2021 (JTLP 2021) which centred on the problem of unjust transitions, the process of negotiating a just transition plan, and the pathways toward just transition policies (Cha et al. 2022). All together we identified seven distinct just transition cases, which we propose to examine more closely in this article by using a comparative method that is based on an analytical scheme, the goal of which is to ensure a holistic understanding of transitions (JTLC 2018; Stevis/Felli 2016). *Breadth* refers to what and who is covered by the transition policy. *Depth* refers to the ecosocial purpose of the transition policy. *Ambition* refers to whether the policy aims at modest or far-reaching changes. While one could equate depth with ambition, our research has highlighted the need to avoid methodological and political particularism and nationalism (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002) by recognising that policies may often be beneficial for some within the world political economy while being at the expense of others. Thus, this research advances our understanding of the politics of just transitions currently pursued in the US and proposes an analytical approach useful for interpreting other just transitions, both domestically and globally.

We begin with a brief review of relevant literature in order to situate our research. We then present our analytical framework before presenting our methods and applying the framework to our data. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our case studies for developing just transition policies.

2. Just transitions: toward a critical analysis

The strategy for what we now call ‘just transition’ emerged in the 1970s from U.S. labour leader Tony Mazzocchi and others as an attempt to reconcile environmental and social concerns and subvert the “job blackmail” strategy that forces workers to work in unsafe and toxic environments or risk losing their jobs (Kazis/Grossman 1991; Leopold 2007; Stevis 2023). Mazzocchi argued that there should be support for transitioning workers who were displaced due to environmental policies and for workers exposed to hazardous and toxic materials (Labor Network for Sustainability and Strategic Practice 2016). This early version of just transition was strongly focused on supporting displaced workers and frontline communities and involved collaboration with environmental justice and community organisations. More importantly, just transition was embedded within a comprehensive political programme, the goal of which was to advance the social welfare state in the US (Labor Party 1996). In that sense it is useful to call the U.S. version of just transition ‘explicit’, because its intent was to explicitly address the challenges stemming from industrial transitions. In contrast, ‘implicit’ just transition policies are embedded in robust social welfare systems (Stevis 2023).

While the early calls for just transition were not centred on energy, the rise of climate change politics has increasingly connected just transition with energy issues in the minds of most analysts and practitioners (Bastos-Lima 2022; Schwane 2021; Stevis 2023). Yet, recognising that an energy transition impacts more than the energy workers themselves, such discussions of just transition further highlighted the environmental justice dimension, integrating ideals of justice into energy transitions (Williams/Doyon 2019). In understanding what makes a transition ‘just’, scholars note that past energy transitions have resulted in “winners and losers” (Eames/Hunt 2013). This research highlights that in addition to shifting from carbon-based to renewable sources of energy, social and economic factors also require consideration, including a deliberate analysis of who bears the burden from an energy transition, who benefits, and how any negative economic and social impacts can be mitigated in such a way that makes the transition just (Newell/Mulvaney 2013).

Breadth. By breadth we refer to the geographic and temporal scales and the sectoral and social scope of a policy, which we map against the geographic and temporal scales of the transition. Geographically, a just transition policy may be local, national, or international. The geographic scale of just transitions, however, gains meaning only if we contrast it to the geographic scale of the transitions they are intended to address (Gürtler et al. 2021). The cases discussed here are relatively local. Yet, it should be noted that, often, seemingly local cases, such as a plant shutdown, are due to global factors, such as deindustrialisation and corporate strategies. Accordingly, given the globalised nature of the world political economy, we must always ask whether a local transition leads to downward ('race to the bottom') or upward ('race to the top') harmonisation. Downward harmonisation is more likely to occur when a local or sectoral policy externalises its costs, leading others to do the same. Upward harmonisation is more likely if the just transition policy absorbs its costs and minimises negative externalities. Neither is easy, but a just transition that benefits some workers and communities at the expense of others within the same value chain cannot be considered a just transition (ITUC et al. 2022).

Many just transition policies envision decades of implementation, but we should ask whether the long term ecological and social provisions of the just transition are commensurate with the temporal footprint of the transition, meaning whether its provisions cover the legacies of the past without shifting its costs onto the future (Cha 2017; Weller 2019). While just transition literature frequently addresses the social aspect of transitions (i.e. does the just transition address the immediate needs of workers and communities adequately? does the policy provide for people harmed in the past, such as coal miners afflicted with black lung, until the end of their lives? and does it ensure that the caregivers, largely women, for those miners enjoy life chances comparable to the people they care for?), the ecological considerations tend to be less prominent; i.e., does the policy provide for long term remediation commensurate with the risks of chemicals or mined areas or decommissioned nuclear plants or radioactive waste? What are the ecological consequences of replacement technologies or industries, and how can they be mitigated? How can we minimise, for instance, the mineral mining necessary for the production of electric vehicle batteries required by the transportation transition to electric vehicles?

The scope of transition policies is also important. Sectorally, just transition is commonly associated with the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources. Yet, this singular focus on energy may leave out other important sectors in transition, such as food and agriculture (Bastos Lima 2022), areas of the economy impacted by artificial intelligence (IndustriALL 2022), or caregiving, education and other public sectors that serve as pillars of support for the existing regime (Fitzgerald 2022).

The scope of just transition considers the degree to which it encompasses broader social justice implications. A just transition policy from coal may be limited to frontline coal miners or coal plant operators, in the process leaving out service workers, the families of coal miners and operators, or the teachers and students in the local education system that faces declining tax revenue. For example, one of the most important labour policies in the US, the National Labour Relations Act of 1935, excluded agricultural, household and home healthcare workers, these being largely people of colour and immigrants (Perrea 2011).

Depth. The literature on socioecological justice is vast (e.g. Coolsaet 2021; Ehresman/Stevis 2018; Low/Gleeson 1998). We know, for instance, that ecological priorities can range from those promoting green capitalism and justice as fairness to those that promote ecosocialist priorities. Hopwood et al. (2005) offer one of the most compelling analytical schemes for addressing the interface of social (in)equality and the recognition of nature's intrinsic value. Based on these, they identify three categories of policies in terms of their socioecological goals – status quo, reformist, and transformative. They are also very aware of the fact that many policies – often quite 'ambitious' socially or ecologically – are outside the broad parameters of sustainable development. We think that this is worth keeping in mind with respect to just transitions, in the sense that many transitional policies, even when effective in one way or another, may be outside the parameters of just transition. For example, a massive transition to renewable energy that does not include protections and rights for those affected, including marginalised communities and workers, would not be considered a just transition. Similarly, an approach to justice that includes the more-than-human but omits social justice or even considers it an obstacle would also fall outside the realm of just transition (Pedersen et al. 2022).

Ambition. Quite often the differentiation in terms of the ambition of a particular transition or policy is based on what we call depth. However, there is significant literature that points to the fact that the social welfare political economies of the Global North owe much to their colonial histories (e.g., Bhambra/Holmwood 2018) and what Brand and Wissen (2021) call the ‘imperial mode of living’. Currently, socialised healthcare systems in the Global North depend on skilled and unskilled immigrants from the Global South. Nativist movements often promote a social welfare state limited to categories of people within a country. More broadly, international politics and law are profoundly based on differentiating between citizens and non-citizens, regardless of the degree of connection between people and place. We need to make sure not to label as transformative a just transition policy that is exclusive and externalises costs, no matter how much it focuses on social and ecological justice for some people and natures (Vachon 2022; Cha et al. 2020; Stevis/Felli 2016).

With that in mind, a key part of our analytical framework is the differentiation of just transitions in terms of their ambition (see e.g., JTRC 2018; Stevis 2023). At one end of the spectrum we find what can be called neoliberal just transitions based on opportunity while regulating corporate power and discretion within the parameters of corporate social responsibility. Such an approach has gained more traction recently (Just Transition Center and B Team 2018). While consistent with liberal capitalism, it poses a threat to strong social welfare regimes. A second category of just transitions that the JTRC termed ‘managerial’ offers protections and a targeted and limited safety net for groups of workers or communities. This may be a strategic choice by a regime facing a crisis or it may be the product of a particularistic and exclusive alliance between state, capital, communities, and workers (Gough 2020). But it can also be the result of the balance of power that forces advocates of just transition to accept something less than what they had hoped. Just transition policies that are ends in themselves and limited to sectors or stakeholders we can call reformist, while stronger and more universal reforms that are strategic parts of a more emancipatory politics can be labelled as structural reforms (for an effort to discuss just transitions and social welfare regimes, see Krause et al. 2022). This leads us to the most transformative category – a just transition policy that is an integral part of a broad and deep ecosocial state, as envisioned by those

movements that fuse social and ecological justice for all affected, including the natural realm (Vachon 2021). The specific names of the various levels of ambition are less important than understanding that just transition policies vary from those that largely affirm what is, to those that aim to change the rules of the political economy.

3. Method: community-engaged oral history

Our research methodology is one of community-engaged oral history, based on interviews documenting the lived experiences of working people who have been through or who anticipate a transition. As a collaborative approach to research, community-based participatory research equitably includes all affected in the research process and often involves partnerships between academic and community organisations, with the goal of increasing the value of the research product for all partners (Coughlin et al. 2017). According to Ritchie (2014: 1), oral history “collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance” through recorded interviews. Participants were asked about their early lives and development leading up to their current affiliations, and then specifically about the transitions they experienced or the transitions they organise around, using oral history techniques. In other words, the oral history process is as much a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee as it is the collection of data from a source. Importantly, the use of oral history data is not predicated on predicting behaviour, but instead on understanding what has transpired, how interviewees think about their experiences, and how those experiences may inform their views of the present or the future, which is why we have chosen this method to increase our understanding of transitions.

For this project, the Labor Network for Sustainability convened a national organising committee in 2019 to develop and pursue a Just Transition Listening Project (JTLP 2021). The goal was to capture the voices of workers and communities in transition. The committee, which was comprised of representatives from many different backgrounds, including participants from labour, environmental justice groups, Indigenous organisations, community members from varied geographical locations, and the authors of this contribution, worked together to formulate a broad set of

open-ended interview questions and to identify participants for the oral history interviews. Again, the questions were designed to maximise our understanding of what had transpired, how participants thought about their experiences, and how those experiences may inform their views of the present or the future. Many participants were invited through a snowball sample based on LNS partner recommendations, including labour, environmental justice, and Indigenous networks. In selecting our interviewees, we sought, as much as possible, to interview people familiar with transition cases, as well as just transition initiatives, and to seek out different voices and views about these cases. Through these interviews, seven cases emerged, all of which can be read about in the LNS report (JTLP 2021). We were aware of several of these cases and some of us had already conducted research on them (Cha et al. 2020). In other instances, the cases emerged as important findings during the interviews.

To assist with data collection, the committee trained eight community members from various labour unions and community groups to assist the research team in the collection of the oral histories which serve as the basis of the current study. Our analytic approach was an iterative process of conducting oral history interviews, transcribing them, and coding the data according to major themes and subthemes. All interviews were conducted via a web-based conferencing app, recorded, immediately transcribed, and then coded to inform future observations and interviews.

4. Cases and discussion

Here we examine the following cases of transition in the chronological order they occurred: the end of logging in the Redwoods forest and subsequent Expansion Plan of the late 1970s; the 2015 Plan to close the Huntley Coal Power Plant in Tonawanda, New York State; the 2016 plan to close the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Plant; the responses to the closing of the GM plant in Lordstown, Ohio in 2018; the 2018 Washington State's unsuccessful Initiative 1631; the 2019 Colorado State's Just Transition from coal electricity policy; the labour-social environmentalist coalition that led to the unionisation of the electric bus company Proterra in Los Angeles County in 2019. Some of these initiatives failed (Washington) or did not

develop a full/explicit just transition strategy (Lordstown), but they illustrate the politics of crafting transitions as well as exemplifying different visions. Two of them were at a state level (Colorado and Washington); four of them were at a local level (Diablo Canyon, Huntley, Redwoods, Lordstown). Two dealt with coal (Colorado, Huntley), one with nuclear power (Diablo Canyon), one with logging (Redwoods), two with manufacturing (Lordstown and Proterra), and one with all forms of energy and the broader economy (Washington). Combined, they provide an outline of just transition politics in the US, at least to the end of 2021, while highlighting just transitions at different stages of the policy process as well as across the economy. In addition to the interviews, we also draw from primary and secondary materials. In the original report, we utilised such material largely for accuracy, to let the voices of the people we interviewed be heard. In subsequent work, including this, we have drawn a bit more on that material in order to place the cases in historical and analytical context (e.g., Cha et al. 2022).

Table 1 provides a summary of our cases in terms of the analytical scheme we proposed. Here we provide some historical and political background for each case. More information can be found in the JTLP Report (2021). The oldest case is the Redwood Employee Protection Program of 1978, and while the ideas of ‘just transition’ had been planted, as mentioned earlier, it was before the term ‘just transition’ was explicitly used in 1995. An examination of the Act, however, shows that it was a just transition policy, highlighting the fact that just transition strategies must be understood in the context of efforts at ensuring that working people and communities do not suffer the impacts of transitions. Equally important, it underscores the fact that the connection of just transition policies to decarbonised energy and climate-friendly actions is an historical development rather than inherent in the strategy of just transition. ‘Just transition’ strategies can be found throughout history, often within collective agreements which ensured that companies offered workers certain protections during transition. In the Redwood case, the goal was to expand the Redwoods Park, thus protecting it from the logging that was intensifying in the Western US at the time. While this specific policy can be considered a success in that it addressed the concerns of displaced workers and communities, it was too narrow in scale and scope to prevent the profound

conflicts between workers and environmentalists that took place during the 1980s and 1990s and which have had profound impacts on the relations between these two movements in the US (see Loomis 2021).

The closing of the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant – originally envisioned for 2025 – was the result of environmentalist pressure, the high cost of retrofitting the plant, and the decreasing cost of renewable energy. The decision to close the plant in an orderly and equitable manner was a reaction to conjunctural dynamics rather than proactive planning. While environmentalists, and some political and community leaders, pushed for the closing of the plant on environmental grounds, that was not the case with the main union at the plant. Rather, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers realised that the plant would close both because its license was coming to an end and due to the fact that the utility commission declined to renew the license for cost reasons. Recent developments, including a slower uptake of renewables and concern for grid stability, has delayed plant closure for five to 10 years. While outside the scope of this paper, over-ruling the already adopted transition plan could be seen as reverting to an unjust transition.

The closing of the Huntley coal plant in Tonawanda, New York, was largely attributable to the declining competitiveness of coal power during the ongoing energy realignment at the time. The teacher's union, in partnership with a local environmental justice organisation, was one of the main organisers of the transition process because the decrease in tax revenue from closing the plant would impact the economic wellbeing of students and schools. The resulting coalition worked with the state labour federation to leverage funds to stabilise the town's economy. The role of the plant workers was secondary. While this is a local case – the plant closing was not part of a larger ramping down of coal – it demonstrates, in a very immediate way, the direct impact of energy transitions on workers along the value chain. The teacher's union was involved because the decreased revenue negatively impacted the school district. Even though teachers are not energy workers or directly engaged with the energy economy, the decline of the energy economy directly impacts them. Thus, understanding the impacts of a transition along a value chain requires attention to inter-dependent structures, something that can be gained through systematic empirical research.

When General Motors (GM) closed its plant in Lordstown in 2019, over 4,200 jobs were eliminated, with severe impacts on the community (O'Brien 2020). Some of those workers were, often reluctantly, able to relocate to work in other parts of the company, as provided by the union's collective agreement. Others could not relocate for a variety of reasons, whether these were related to age or family, or could relocate but would lose their seniority, which would severely affect their income and fringe benefits. Initiatives by workers led to the creation of a transition clearinghouse office, supported by a Department of Labor grant. Lordstown demonstrates the declining capacity of collective agreements to prevent, slow down, and cover all workers, since the rise of neoliberalism in 1970s. It also demonstrates the resilience of workers and the possibility of modest but innovative solutions, such as the transition office, against overwhelming odds.

If these three just transition responses were reactions to local transitions already set in motion, the Jobs to Move America effort to organise the Californian bus company Proterra can be considered as a proactive one. When the Jobs to Move America strategy was set up by the national labour federation, the AFL-CIO, which was historically sceptical of just transition, the goal was to mobilise local and national policies to encourage local manufacturing, beginning with public transportation procurement. The Proterra case is part of the broader strategy of U.S. Steelworkers (USW) Local 675 to prepare for fossil fuel phaseout. This is significant because USW675 was an Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers local (before OCAW merged with USW), one that strongly supported the strategy of just transition from its inception, and which remains one of the key members of the Just Transition Alliance. What makes this case proactive is the fact that it aims to engage cities, unions, and manufacturers in changing what is produced, and under what terms and conditions, in order to provide immediate employment opportunities for workers, community benefits agreements, and to offer a prefigurative strategy of change. While this specific case is local in scale, JMA is a national strategy, i.e., one that can take roots where the opportunity emerges. Its scope applies to workers in a particular sector – public transportation manufacturing and assembly. The social goal of the strategy is that of good employment opportunities that may have positive environmental benefits. However, in 2023 Proterra

decided to shut down its unionised assembly plant and consolidated their operations in a non-union facility in the US South, demonstrating that efforts to generate a just transition may not be enduring. As long as labour standards vary across space, and there is no penalty for a company that abandons its commitments to workers and communities, movement towards just transitions is tentative and contingent.

The next case, Initiative 1631 in Washington State, was the product of an alliance that included labour unions, environmentalists, environmental justice activists, Indigenous people, policy makers, and other civil society organisations and movements. Its central element was the establishment of a carbon fee on emissions – the first in the country – with earnings going to fund air and water quality, energy programmes, forest health, community revitalisation, and support for displaced workers. Furthermore, boards that included membership from all coalition partners would have had decision-making power in the distribution of the revenue. Initiative 1631 can be considered a comprehensive just green transition because of its proactive and economy-wide nature, rather than a just transition as a response to an unjust green transition, even though it did provide exceptions for key companies in the state, such as Boeing. The Initiative was defeated because of fossil fuel capital, the opposition from many fossil fuel and construction unions that have historically blocked progressive politics (Hyde/Vachon 2019), and inadequate financial support from environmental funders for grassroots mobilisation. Its value was in showing both how to build power among environmental justice groups, keep a progressive alliance together, and produce a comprehensive plan. It was also a lesson about deep divisions within labour and the impact of job blackmail exercised by capital. A unique aspect of the Initiative is that, although it failed at the ballot box, the inclusion of Free Prior and Informed Consent, a demand of Indigenous members of the coalition, was subsequently accepted as gubernatorial policy.

The last case is that of Colorado, where an alliance of unions and political leaders, with some participation by environmental justice and environmentalist organisations, negotiated a just transition from coal policy in response to the State's 2018 decarbonisation policy. Here, the groups came together primarily as a reaction to green legislative action rather than as a proactive just green transition policy. Its sole focus was on coal, even though the state's decarbonisation policy covers all emissions. The reason behind

this choice is the fact that the coal industry, in addition to accounting for most of the state’s electric energy production, is also much weaker than the more powerful natural gas industry (Betsill/Stevis 2016). Due to market forces, coal is already on the decline, regardless of any climate initiative, whereas gas use continues to grow. Yet, this is the first explicit and developed attempt toward a just transition from coal policy in the US, thus attracting a lot of interest as a potential model. One recognised gap is the limited attention to disproportionately affected communities (i.e., poor and marginalised communities and people of colour), while another is the need to procure sufficient funds to implement the policy after 2025, when it will be in full force. A third gap, less pronounced because the state does not produce a lot of coal, is that the policy does allow for the initiation or reactivation of coal mines to produce coal for export – there is no provision requiring that this coal be for industrial rather than thermal use. Domestically, coal is largely shifting from thermal to industrial use because most thermal coal users have transitioned to fracked gas. As such, coal is less likely to be mined for thermal uses. Therefore, limiting mining to only industrial uses would prevent coal from being used for thermal uses and thus limit its marketability.

Case	Breadth: Scale	Breadth: Scope	Depth: Social	Depth: Environmental	Ambition
Redwoods	Narrow (Local policy but logging a regional issue)	Narrow	Significant assistance to loggers in expansion but not all loggers in region; recognition of the value of Indigenous people’s forestry practices.	Explicit but local preservation of ecosystem	Managerial – not a state level or regional policy (despite pressing need for that)

Case	Breadth: Scale	Breadth: Scope	Depth: Social	Depth: Environmental	Ambition
Diablo Canyon	Narrow (plant and local community but plant provides substantial part of California's energy; temporal reach, e.g., nuclear wastes are not part of policy)	Narrow (plant workers and local community; not all affected by closing of plant)	Significant for those covered (assistance to workers and local schools; no broader just transition policy)	Implicit in closing of plant; not a nuclear energy transition	Managerial
Tonawanda	Narrow (plant and community; temporal reach limited to closing of plant and stabilization of tax base)	Narrow (plant workers and local community; not all affected by closing of plant)	Significant for setting up state funding (some assistance to public workers and community; no broader just transition policy dealing with city decarbonization)	Implicit in closing of plant	Managerial

Case	Breadth: Scale	Breadth: Scope	Depth: Social	Depth: Environmental	Ambition
Lordstown	Narrow (plant and community, but with significant translocal impacts; very limited temporal reach for unionised workers)	Narrow (public workers affected by lower tax income; community)	Minimal assistance to find opportunities for workers and spouses. Laid off workers hired in transition centre.	none	Neoliberal. Though workers are involved, the extent of their agency is constrained by the terms of their contract and the grant.
Jobs to Move America (Proterra Case)	Local but part of national strategy.	Narrow (some plant workers were covered by collective agreement and received services from transition centre)	Social justice because of good employment and community benefits, i.e., no social safety provisions	Environmental justice because of public transportation. No environmental provisions.	Neoliberal if it remains local; possibly reformist if the strategy is successful in many places
Washington Initiative 1631	Broad (state level; long term green transition)	Broad (most emissions; would affect all citizens)	Deep (significant social welfare and investment provisions)	Deep (Significant and explicit environmental provisions)	Structural reform

Case	Breadth: Scale	Breadth: Scope	Depth: Social	Depth: Environmental	Ambition
Colorado	Broad (state level; temporally limited to closing plants and some mines)	Narrow (formal workers in coal plants and mines and coal communities)	Significant but selective (transitional assistance to specific workers and communities covered but not comprehensive social protection provisions; communities must apply for funding – not easy for those with limited such capacity)	Shallow compared to decarbonisation bill. (Implicit in closing of plants. Remediation would require additional policies and funds; does not preclude mining and export of coal)	Managerial if it remains limited to coal; reformist if it expands to oil and gas (given that the state has a decarbonisation goal) and if the state finds a way to direct funds to those most in need – rather than having them apply for it.

Table 1: Cases: Breadth, Depth and Ambition

Source: own elaboration

5. Conclusions

One of the key consequences of our analytical scheme is that it compels us to explore the empirical reach of just transition efforts. For example, it requires us to point out that the Colorado policy does not preclude the externalisation of its costs through exporting coal or natural gas. The

Washington State case revealed that a policy that was deemed necessary to get labour support for Proposition 1631 – exempting Boeing and other trade exposed industries – has local and global implications. Overall, the findings highlight the necessity of exploring who is included and who is excluded or overlooked, even in socially and ecologically deeper policies. In the current global political economy social welfare policies are typically administered and enjoyed on a national level, but their costs and impacts are largely transnational (Brand/Wissen 2021). To consider a policy transformative without exploring its translocal impacts is to obscure power and history.

The specific cases that we focused on are but a part of the overall project. Taken as a whole, the views expressed by the research participants range from neoliberal to transformative in nature and, often, demonstrate a resilient and independent capacity to reflect on what is and what should be. Thus, in interpreting these policies we are not passing judgement on the people involved or even those that supported less ambitious policies. All the cases discussed involved collaboration among various advocates of a just transition policy. They did not all agree with the result but found enough they agreed on to support it or chose to support it to solve a problem or to take a step toward something more profound. In fact, it can be argued that narrow proposals are the most viable under the circumstances, and to reject them in the name of more transformative proposals both deprives some of those affected with necessary relief while precluding the possibility that narrow successes can be woven into a larger programme of action, such as a Green New Deal.

Yet, it is important for analysts, workers, and communities to reflect on the ambition of policies and proposals, because they do vary – both because of their own worldviews and, more importantly, as a result of the political economy within which they operate. At a very superficial level, all these cases – except for Lordstown – could have been considered sustainability transitions (Hess 2019). A closer look, however, demonstrates profound differences in both form and social purpose.

The final lesson of this project is that listening to workers and directly impacted people, across value chains, is a best practice that can be applied anywhere/everywhere. Listening to those affected is necessary for a variety of reasons. First, it prevents us from reifying people and communities as

undifferentiated and inherently democratic and emancipatory forces. But done critically and with empathy, listening helps expand democracy by recording the views of those not normally heard, while subordinating the views of the listener to those of the people s/he is talking with. Third, it demands that we think about the origins and function of what the listener may consider to be contradictory views expressed by the same people. Finally, learning from the views of rank-and-file workers, environmental justice, and Indigenous actors is a step toward appreciating how important their involvement is in creating just transitions; because, even if workers and communities are not uniformly democratic and emancipatory, it is unlikely that democratic and emancipatory politics can be built without the agency of these same groups.

- 1 See LNS website: www.labor4sustainability.org/about/making-a-living-on-a-living-planet/, 20.9.2023.

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ABSTRACT Seit 2015 gibt es eine Vielzahl von Maßnahmen und Initiativen für eine ‚just transition‘. Im Rahmen des ‚Just Transition Listening‘-Projekts, das Anfang 2020 vom Labor Network for Sustainability ins Leben gerufen wurde, haben wir in den USA sieben verschiedene ‚just transition‘-Fallbeispiele identifiziert. Die Vielfalt dieser Beispiele erfordert ein analytisches Schema, das zwischen unterschiedlichen Formen von just transitions unterscheidet und die Folgen für diverse Bevölkerungsgruppen berücksichtigt. So zeigt sich, dass eine politische Initiative, wie beispielsweise ein nationaler oder transnationaler ‚Green New Deal‘, zwar für einen Teil der Bevölkerung innerhalb eines Landes und für die politische Weltökonomie erstrebenswert sein mag, zugleich aber nur auf Kosten anderer Gruppen realisiert werden kann. Die vorliegende Untersuchung trägt zu einem besseren Verständnis der unterschiedlichen just transitions bei, die derzeit in den USA angestrebt werden, und liefert darüber hinaus nützliche und relevante analytische Erkenntnisse für die Untersuchung von just transitions, unabhängig davon, ob es sich um lokale oder transnationale Prozesse handelt.

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