

Building a democratic expertise to inform labour's struggle for a just transition

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Abstract

Increasingly, the concept of a just transition is shaping labour's view of environmental justice but the experience of trade unions working towards just transitions has been mixed, although much action has built on the existing relationships that trade unions have had with their members, other trade unions and civil society organisations. Recent analysis of trade union environmental action has found that a more radical approach is needed that will promote the long-term interests of labour in what has been described as the just transition. This paper argues that if trade unions want future, more transformative strategies, they will have to build their own expertise, building on their own research which has informed their own democratic expertise. This paper makes a contribution to this process by identifying 'Three Pillars' which could be used to inform trade union thinking and action. The Three Pillars are: a) critical analysis of current net-zero policies, b) new green, industrial strategies supported by social infrastructure, c) changing labour- environmental relationships. This paper includes a case study of a trade union which is campaigning for a new National Climate Service.

Key words

trade unions, just transitions, democratic expertise, environment

Introduction

Working towards a just transition

In this third decade of the 21st century, trade unions face many challenges. A global climate/ environmental crisis has implications for workers throughout the world. Mitigation measures to address problems caused by the changing climate will impact on jobs and employment in both positive and negative ways. Extensive restructuring of economies and societies will be needed so that carbon emissions are reduced, and fossil fuels are replaced by wind, solar and other alternative energy sources. Yet, the political leadership needed to lead these changes is absent.

In many high-income countries, the effects of neoliberalism, privatisation and outsourcing has undermined the security of employment and wages. The impact of new digital technologies on the workforce is unclear. The uneven investment in public services at the same time as the population is ageing, has implications for labour.

Rates of unionisation have been falling during this period of privatisation and outsourcing. The pursuit of workplace democracy and social dialogue is uneven in many sectors and reflects how trade unions lack legitimacy in shaping a future economy and society. But it is this situation that trade unions will have to address if they are to play a key role in creating a just transition.

As the climate and environment of this planet changes, the creation of new economies and societies draw on different types of expertise. Although there is a growing consensus about possible future scenarios, there is a divergence about which future policies and strategies are to be pursued.

This paper argues that if trade unions want to pursue a just transition informed by social justice, they will have to build their own expertise, from their own knowledge and skills, to inform these strategies. The research question is 'What areas of expertise do trade unions need to play active roles in creating a just transition?'

This article is structured in six sections:

1. A literature review of recent research into trade union action and a just transition.
2. A methodology section explaining democratic expertise and other conceptual models of the relationships between expertise and trade unions.
3. Three pillars of expertise to underpin trade union action for a just transition: Assessing risk; New green, industrial strategies; Environmental crises and the commodification of nature.
4. A suggested programme for research.
5. A case study of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS).
6. Conclusion

1. Literature review

Trade unions started to argue for a just energy transition in the 1980s but most trade union action has taken place in the last 20-30 years. There is a growing literature that is starting to look critically at some of the different approaches that trade unions have taken in specific industries which will be directly affected by policies that aim to mitigate climate change, for example, car, oil and gas. By comparing trade unions actions from different countries, some of the contrasting strategies start to emerge. These studies show that taking action is closely related to attitudes of union members to social justice, alliances with environmental groups and democracy.

Safeguarding jobs

Many trade unions start to work towards a just transition in order to protect their jobs during a period of industrial change. This may be the closure of a coalmine, reduction of oil and gas production or change in types of industrial production. Thomas and Doerflinger (2020) in a study of trade union climate change strategies found that the strategies were strongly influenced by their sectoral interests, which 'are mediated by union identities and conceptions of union democracy'. A recent study of Belgian unions working towards green and digital transformations in the car industry found that they reacted to management proposals focusing on employment and working conditions but did not try and influence the wider transformations of the car industry (Pulignano *et al*, 2023).

Strategic approaches to industrial production/ green transitions

The German trade union IG Metall, which organises car workers, has been the subject of several studies. Strötzel and Brunkhorst (2019) examined how climate regulation has impacted on the car industry. The IG Metall strategy was based on its members having three roles: 'as employees in the automotive industry, they have an interest in safe and good jobs; as users of mobility services, they have interest in reliable and rapid transport; as citizens, they want to live in a clean and healthy environment' (Strötzel and Brunkhorst, 2019: 254). Although initially the focus was on changes in employment, IG Metall took a multi-level strategy, including influencing EU, federal, state, regional, company and plant levels, which secured changes in industrial production, transport and mobility with an international perspective.

Dupuis *et al* (2024) in a study of car workers in North America and Germany (IG Metall) highlighted some of the problems of ensuring a smooth transition. Jobs were often lost without any replacement 'green jobs' because in transitioning to electric cars, battery sites and assembly plants were not always built near to each other.

In Germany, there are stronger collective bargaining and workers' councils that enable unions to work with governments and corporations. In North America corporate decision-making dominates, with trade unions in a weaker bargaining position. Dupuis *et al* (2023) concluded that national institutional settings, evolving policy frameworks, and sector-specific risks and opportunities facing autoworkers and their unions determine whether a transition is just. They recommend that unions are involved in industry policies to encourage the expansion of electric cars and that unions are given more rights to participate in corporate decision-making.

During coal transitions in Germany and South Africa, trade unions adopted two different strategies: oppositional and transformative. The pursuit of these strategies was influenced by many factors: the type of employment affected, commitment to social justice, internal democracy, alliances with environmental groups, just transition policy initiatives and debates about reducing decarbonisation (Kalt, 2022).

Nature and trade unions

Involving trade unions in environmental campaigns often requires a different process of awareness raising. Nature has often been seen by the trade union movement as outside the interests of labour and as part of recreation Rätzl *et al* (2018) found that in South Africa, it was often difficult to integrate environmental issues onto a trade union agenda, even though the way in which companies have damaged nature is part of the capitalist process of exploiting natural resources. Nature needs to be seen as an ally of labour. This requires wider awareness raising about the relationship between nature and labour.

There is a long environmental history showing the interrelationship of work and nature. Barca (2014) explored the relationship between labour and nature through the development of environmental justice campaigns in response to industrial hazards and disasters. She concluded

that to build just transition policies “*a first step is recognising the historical role of work as the single most important interface between society and nature*” (Barca, 2014: 22).

New expertise, education and training

New expertise, education and training is emerging as a major factor that shapes trade union strategies. There is a growing awareness among trade unionists that they need to understand more about how climate change will impact on methods of production and the wider industrial process as well as the daily life of workers (Lundstrom, 2018). Changes in transport and heating are two areas of daily life which will have to change from using fossil fuels to alternative sources of energy. A study that compared the experience of Sweden with the Spanish experience of the trade union *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO) found that successful union action depended on working on issues that brought the “*immediate interests of workers with their long-term interests as citizens*”.

Galgóczy (2019) examined the transitions that the coal and car industries, which both contribute to high levels of carbon dioxide emissions, are making, showing how transitions vary according to industry and regional/ local contexts. He concluded that there are several prerequisites for a just transition in these two industries. Workers must have a commitment to change. Companies must provide programmes of workplace education about climate change as well as providing forums for workers to discuss with experts. Trade unions have an important role to play in this educational process. Workers will need to acquire new skills and employers will have to facilitate their training.

The experience of trade unions working towards just transitions has been mixed although much action has built on the existing relationships that trade unions have had with their members, other trade unions and civil society organisations. Recent analysis of trade union environmental action has found that a more radical approach is needed that will promote the long-term interests of labour, acknowledging that this might expose some areas of conflict, particularly in the international trade union movement. The engagement of international trade unions in climate change negotiations shows a different type of dynamics. There is often a conflict between radical versus moderate measures, but this is informed by the internal politics of international trade unions, coalition strategies and the institutional environment of the UN climate change process (Thomas, 2021).

Existing structures of economic ownership and politics will have to be replaced by a transformation in production and consumption, underpinned by economic democracy, social ownership and extensive planning and cooperation. The limits of just transition strategies are becoming clearer because of the growing number of institutions and organisations that are involved and the subsequent dilution of labour interests. What trade unions need is ‘innovation and capacity building to become effective environmental actors’ (Snell, 2018: 554). This would support them to become ‘agents of productive change’ (Uzzell, 2022).

A just transition will encompass a rethinking of the relationships between labour and ecological systems. For unions to play a lead role will require the creation of new expertise, as well as drawing on the extensive environmental and labour histories. Trade unions might develop new approaches, for example, challenging the commodification of labour and nature and working towards green, industrial strategies.

2. Methodology/ concepts

2.1 Democratic expertise

A review of recent research into trade union action has found that trade unions are beginning to develop a much wider, more extensive vision to contribute to a just transition. This raises

questions about how trade unions can be more proactive, stepping outside conventional sectoral boundaries and trying to influence wider public policies. The challenge is to draw on trade union experiences and to create expertise which is characterised by a labour perspective for a just transition. This can be defined as a form of ‘democratic expertise’.

The term ‘democratic expertise’ implies that the expertise is both created and applied using democratic principles. This may be when scientific experts work with politicians, when expertise is presented to the public through participatory processes or a third scenario is when civil society groups or social movements organise expert knowledge, gathered through their lived experience, which might be both scientific expertise and expertise created by people themselves (Meyer, 2016; Asenbaum, 2021; Krick, 2021).

There is a long history of examining the relationship between experts and citizens, as well as research into public participation in planning, environmental issues and public services. Labour does not feature prominently in much of this research, although it does not mean that trade unions lack their own democratic expertise.

2.2 Trade union research

Many trade unions have a history of developing their own expertise, often through commissioning research into an issue which trade union members have chosen to campaign on, for example, health and safety, anti-privatisation campaigns. Trade union expertise can also be created by surveying the experience of members, in order to expand their understanding of a particular workplace problem (TUC, 2023). There is also a growing number of trade unionists who have played an important role in identifying new ideas and relevant expertise that could be used by trade unions in just transition strategies (Räthzel *et al*, 2021).

Increasingly, the climate/ environmental crisis is seen not just as a reason for reducing fossil fuel emissions and adopting net-zero policies but, if a just transition is to be achieved, will require a socio-ecological transformation. If trade unions are to play an influential role in this transformation, then they will have to have access to sources of new ideas about how to organise the economy and society as well as contributing new ideas about how this can be pursued.

Recent studies (Brand and Niedermoser, 2019) have set out some of the arguments for how trade unions could become involved in this process. They suggest that trade unions could set up ‘socio-ecological competences’ to give them political credibility and establish departments of environmental politics. Trade unions politics could also look not just at the reproduction of the workforce but also the reproduction of society and nature. This would challenge the corporate interests and stakeholder value.

Nitsche-Whitfield (2022) recommends that trade unions “*could benefit from advocating a just social-ecological transformation*” and that ecological movements should advocate for a socio-ecological transformation in which trade unions would play a key role. Coalition working has already been used by many trade unions in campaigning with environmental organisations.

Trade unions have already started to commission research into ways in which the climate/ environmental crisis could be addressed in economic policy as well as arguing for strategies which meet the needs of labour. Three examples are set out below which show slightly different approaches.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) commissioned research to simulate the impact that public spending increases in the care economy, the green economy, and infrastructure could have across eight middle income countries. This report showed that governments had to increase their investments to support the creation of quality jobs, especially in strategic sectors that are good for both people and the planet including care, infrastructure and the green economy (Onaran and Ovyat, 2023).

This report supported the demand by trade unions at a global level to create 575 million jobs and the formalisation of at least one billion informal jobs by 2030, to enable delivery of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda commitment for full employment and decent work under Sustainable Development Goal 8. This research reflected the position of ITUC as a global union widening awareness about how jobs growth in the green economy has to be seen alongside other key sectors.

The European Public Services Union (EPSU) has commissioned research into waste management and the circular economy. The concept of a circular economy has been promoted by many companies, especially global waste management companies, which recognise that the reusing and repurposing of many items, has implications for their existing business models, which depend on global waste collection. In the development of a circular economy, the collection, sorting and re-processing of materials has generated many poor-quality jobs. EPSU reports have provided a critical perspective on this new type of industrial development, especially the quality of jobs (Wegmann, 2022). The reports are aimed at trade union members and are also used in policy advocacy work with EU institutions, governments and other stakeholders involved in circular economy policies.

A third type of research can be found in the work of Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), an alliance of trade unions and allies working for democratic control and social control of energy, in order to address the climate crisis as well as energy poverty, land degradation and workers' rights. TUED undertakes research which examines future energy policies, placed in the context of public ownership. A recent report '*True Colors: What Role Can Hydrogen Play in the Transition to a Low-Carbon Future?*' examined the many different types of hydrogen, their applications and potential and explains how public ownership is necessary before making decisions about its use (Treat, 2022). This report reflects a different approach to trade union research. It is exploring a possible new form of energy from a critical perspective and brings public ownership into the argument, which could be part of a new just transition.

These three examples show the range of research which trade unions have commissioned. It covers investment in green and care jobs, questioning of a perceived 'solution' to the climate/ environmental crisis in the form of the circular economy and examining the potential of hydrogen from a public ownership perspective. Their research is already supporting innovative trade union thinking.

2.3 'Organic intellectuals'

Gramsci's (1976) concept of 'organic intellectuals' has been chosen to explore the interplay between scientific and trade union expertise. Gramsci saw that each social group which was part of the economy, created a strata of intellectuals, which provided this group with an awareness of their economic position but also their social and intellectual influence. This wider social and intellectual function contributed to the creation of ideas and ideologies which influenced how the economy and society worked. This was an essential part of the exercise of hegemonic power (Gramsci, 1976).

Gramsci went on to explore the role of intellectuals in developing ideas which challenged the dominant ideology or ideas of the existing order. He argued that this could be done through the concept of an 'organic intellectual' who may emerge from existing social movements, which were challenging the existing social and economic order. In creating new ideas, the 'organic intellectual' could create a new philosophy which would challenge what was considered as 'common sense'. This could then challenge the existing ideologies.

This concept is relevant to the current global climate / environmental crisis, which many trade unionists consider will require a change in hegemonic power. In this sense, the position of trade unionists who help to shape how other trade union members and the wider population perceive

the climate/ environmental crisis and possible future strategies, can be seen as ‘organic intellectuals’. Several studies have focused on the way in which individual trade unionists have played a role of ‘organic intellectual’ in changing the way in which their union perceives the climate/ environmental crisis and the type of action needed, which may challenge conventional trade union green actions (Räthzel et al, 2021).

Lundström (2018) found that even in a large, unionised sectors, such as transport, trade unionists did not challenge the relations of production or create a new vision for the role of workers and trade unions in the economy. Through researching the experience of a single trade unionist, an ‘organic intellectual’, he found that to widen the union agenda it was necessary to connect the areas of climate policies, social policies, and labour market policies with the everyday experiences of union members. The trade unionist developed his own expertise through his own experience/ interests and close contacts with international trade union environmentalists.

If trade union ‘organic intellectuals’ can continue to generate expertise in shaping future green industrial policies and environmental change this provides a way of countering some scientific expertise which is used to support existing fossil fuel industries and their ‘green washing’ strategies. Trade unions can also work with scientific experts to develop strategies which would contribute to a new form of economy and society. The creation of new trade union expertise and a new ideology requires a concentrated process of creative and critical work.

“The creation of new superstructures and organisation of intellectual/ moral reform requires critical work (the education of common sense) creative work and active involvement of high intellectuals in the social production of ideas” (Olsaretti, 2014: 376).

One of the challenges will be how trade unionists can find the time and resources to do this.

This paper makes a contribution to this process by identifying what it calls ‘Three Pillars of expertise’ which could be used to inform trade union thinking and action. The process of identifying and defining the ‘Three Pillars’ is set out below. The ‘First Pillar’ provides a rationale for questioning not so much the scientific evidence which is being used to define the climate/ environmental crisis, but the lack of research into the impact of future scenarios and ‘tipping’ points. The ‘Second Pillar’ explores some potential green industrial strategies, which have been developed by researchers concerned with the inadequacy of existing economic models. The ‘Third Pillar’ outlines the importance of re-defining relationships between labour and nature, drawing on recent research. The ‘Three Pillars’ are outlined in the following section.

3. Three Pillars to inform a future trade union response

3.1 First Pillar: Critical analysis of current net zero policies

Although the urgency of the climate/ environmental crises has become more publicly acknowledged, the political commitment to taking action remains uneven. When considering the climate and environmental crises, it is worth asking the question, who is defining the crisis and in what way. This does not mean climate crisis denial but is an attempt to create a more accurate sense of when we might reach ‘tipping points’. Sharpe (2023) argues that the climate emergency has been constructed by current assumptions about the science, economy and diplomacy.

The International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), set up in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations, is the ‘UN body for assessing the science related to climate change’. The report for policy makers is one of the most widely read reports. It provides an accessible account of recent research and provides an analysis of future scenarios. However, although there are references to recent research into low-risk scenarios, there is often a lack of

research into the more disastrous future scenarios. The European Union has only commissioned research to explore the high degrees of warming 25 years after these high risk scenarios were first identified.

If this tension is to be resolved, changes in research funding priorities will be needed so that research that is policy relevant will become a priority rather than research which has a high level of probability. Risks will be assessed in relation to society's objectives, which is to avoid the worst-case scenarios. It will have to involve a wide range of stakeholders, including trade unions in influencing a new research agenda. In 1998, Lubchenco argued that a new 'social contract' was needed between science and society, but this has yet to be developed.

3.2 Second Pillar: Green industrial strategies and the foundational economy

Despite decades of working towards a just transition, there is a paucity of ideas about green, industrial strategies. Marketisation appeared to remove the rationale for new industrial strategies because the market was expected to provide adequate solutions. Recent research shows that strong green, industrial strategies will draw from new types of expertise that support the rethinking of the economy. Investment in social infrastructure, particularly public services, will be an essential part of this future.

An initial analysis, to be undertaken by labour and progressive organisations, is how the nature of government intervention in industrial development has changed over the last 40 years of marketisation and what is needed to replace some of the top-down solutions that have repeatedly failed. Calafati *et al* (2023) describe this as the 'failed market citizenship project', which has been pursued for the last four decades, aiming to promote 'individual consumption at the expense of collective provision' (p.65). This consumption focused strategy has resulted in the depletion of resources and a reduction of collective actions.

Future industrial strategies will need a more grounded approach, rooted in communities, supported by coalitions which are strong enough to implement the conditionality of public-private agreements (Bulfone, 2022). Simultaneously, governments will have to take on new roles, even becoming public entrepreneurs, through state, regional and local investment strategies. Unions could share in shaping these new government roles, through alliances and partnerships. Organised labour and supportive communities will promote and safeguard the essential role that social infrastructure must play in a radical climate/environmental transition, within a new green, industrial context.

This proposal has been further developed by the Foundational Economy Collective, which brings together researchers from across Europe to develop alternative economic and social strategies. Calafati *et al* (2023) set out how some of the UK's problems can be solved using a foundation economy model. There are three initial steps, again linked to rethinking the way in which the economy works. First, to move away from gross domestic product (GDP) and gross value added (GVA) per capita and in their place, to use expenditure and income sharing households as a basic unit of analysis. In the early twentieth century, the household or family was used as a unit of measurement, rather than the individually focused GDP/GVA which was introduced in the 1940s.

Household liveability depends on three foundational pillars: 1. Disposable and residual income, 2. Essential services and 3. Social infrastructure. Currently all three of these pillars of household liveability are dis-functional in the UK, especially for low- and middle-income households. One of their most important suggestions is:

*"to approach the challenge of rebuilding the three pillars of foundational liveability with a political practice of **adaptive reuse**, which aims at sustained meaningful improvement, not generalised claims for transformation or transition to a different state that have little connection to practice"* (Calafati *et al*, 2023:4).

This would involve a change in the standard growth and jobs approach to the economy and replaced with a foundational economy so that the state and other actors come together to create and recreate foundational liveability. Although the term ‘foundational liveability’ is difficult to imagine, it is an important concept for rethinking economic and social policy. It also recognises that public services provide social infrastructure, which is as important as increases in household income.

Households are considered as multi-faceted arrangements, which need public services, for example, education, health and social care, and social infrastructure, for example, parks and libraries (Calafati *et al*, 2023:71). This vision recognises that place plays an important social role and that social attachments to place can be a force for positive change. It challenges the assumption in many regional development policies, that people will migrate to work, rather than accept the value of place-based solutions (Bulfone, 2022).

Although government industrial strategies have received less attention in a market orientated environment, there is some recent work (Mazzucato *et al*, 2019; Lamperti *et al*, 2020), which has used a ‘mission-orientated approach’ which is focused on solving problems and developing products and services to address these problems. This research looked at industrial strategies in different sectors, where governments choose a direction and support the ‘maximum to accelerate innovation and growth in the desired direction’. The forms of support include the use of subsidies, taxes, public procurement, regulation and investment that would help shape markets to draw new technologies into the economy. Technologies need support at every stage. They do not exist in isolation and a technological transition has to be seen as part of an industrial transition (Mazzucato *et al*, 2019).

The concept of a foundational economy and the work of Mariana Mazzucato and her team are beginning to provide new ways of developing progressive, green industrial strategies. Trade unions may find it useful to consider these ideas in relation to their own struggles.

3.3 Third Pillar: Relationship between labour and nature

The relationship between labour and nature/ environment is central to understanding how labour can create knowledge for environmental justice. In the nineteenth century there was already concern about the destruction of the environment. This was a time when science and the newly emerging subjects of chemistry and biology were exploring issues such as the depletion of soil and the alienation of nature. Marx’s work on ecology is highly relevant to the 21st century crisis (Saito, 2017). Recent research into Marx’s approach to ecology has expanded the understanding of this relationship (Foster, 2000/2020).

Marx’s definition of the labour process, how “*man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature*”, is a useful way of starting to understand the relationship between labour and the environment (Marx, 1976: 283). The concept of ‘metabolism’ is key to understanding this relationship. Meszaros (1971), as a member of a European ecological movement in the 1970s, made an important contribution by describing the “*Metabolism relationship is a way of analysing the capitalist mode of production as a historically unique way of reorganising..... metabolic interactions between humans and nature on an unprecedentedly scale*” (Saito, 2023: 18)

This concept of ‘metabolic rift’ provides a way of understanding the disruption of the relationship between human beings and nature under capitalism. The continual use of plentiful, natural resources often resulted in the depletion of these resources, for example, the destruction of forests and soil exhaustion. Although this analysis was written in the nineteenth century, there are many aspects which are relevant to the 21st century. This analysis raises questions about how different economic models need to be challenged as part of addressing the climate/ environmental crisis. As Karl Polanyi wrote in *The Great Transformation*,

“What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors” (Polanyi, 1957: 187).

Until the nineteenth century, privatisation reduced the rights of people to access the common resources of forests, which provided grazing land, hunting and wood throughout Europe. Restrictions to the rights of people making a living from forests and other types of land were imposed by colonial interests in other parts of the world. There are similar processes of displacement taking place today, as part of a new environmental marketisation and commodification process (Rao, 2018) described as ‘sustainability’.

Environmental marketisation has reached a new stage of development with the creation of carbon trading markets, natural asset companies and other forms of financialised environmental products. How to challenge these developments will form part of the struggle for environmental justice, led by trade unions.

The relationship between workers and the environment can be understood through a history of environmental movements and working-class people. Workers have been well aware of some of the environmental risks inherent in technical innovations (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2014) and this knowledge could be used to inform climate/environmental actions now. More needs to be understood about what the alternatives were in the past and what alternatives exist now for an environmental transition. Similarly, the mechanisms that are used to marginalise these alternative strategies must inform labour strategies. Labour requires its own democratic expertise to generate answers to these questions.

Throughout the world, there are attempts to re-define the relationship between people and the environment, or human and non-human subjects (Latour, 2004). In legal terms, the consciousness of other sentient beings is being recognised, with direct implications for environmental strategies through rights of nature policies. The term ‘Rights of Nature’ describes “the different measures taken in a variety of jurisdictions to treat either or all of nature within state boundaries or specific nature features such as rivers and mountains as legal actors with rights” (Epstein, 2023:418). It is only in the 21st century that legal initiatives have started to translate the rights of nature into law. Indigenous communities have been the most active in trying to define these rights.

The concepts of natural capital and eco-system services are widely used in economics. Natural capital assesses the value of nature to economies and eco-system services refers to activities needed to facilitate processes such as pollination, essential for agriculture. Viewing nature as a form of capital creates some of the same problems as viewing workers as human capital. Nature and workers become part of a market with a loss of control over their choices and futures.

However, if nature is posed in terms of labour, drawing from the rethinking of un-waged labour, such as care, so that unpaid labour is valued, then nature is a form of ‘living’ labour. Natural capital is made up of a continual process of reproduction, regeneration and renewal and eco-system services are continually regenerating the biosphere (Battistoni, 2017). This essential contribution is a form of labour, described as ‘hybrid labour’. The term ‘hybrid labour’ allows a sense of collective belonging between humans and non-human subjects. It acknowledges the value of labour as well as relations of compensation, care and value. It gives non-human subjects a place within a political system and not just as part of an economic system. It allows us to think in terms of solidarity across species (Battistoni, 2017: 22). This has implications for how nature is seen and has implications for trade unions.

4. Guidelines for a programme of research

This section outlines some guidelines for a programme of research to contribute to a growing body of ‘democratic expertise’ for trade unions. The questions emerged from considering the key issues covered in each Pillar.

Pillar 1 argues that trade unions need to be more questioning about the scientific results which are used to assess the risks posed by the climate/ environmental crisis. What is now emerging is that the limited extent of research studies which try and prediction the effects of more extreme scenarios. As a way of enabling trade unions to assess their contribution to climate crisis risk assessment, two questions have been drawn up.

How do trade unions contribute to climate/ environmental risk assessments?

What priorities would trade unions like to see in research funding for climate action mitigations?

Pillar 2 presents a new type of economy, a foundational economy, which would contribute to a just transition. The research questions below could support trade unions in developing new industrial strategies. A foundational economy is still a relatively new model but the position and contribution of trade unions in this model is an important part of its development.

How have recent trade union actions influenced new industrial strategies?

How would trade unions work within a new foundational economy?

Pillar 3 explored the relationship between labour and nature and some of the ways in which it needs to become more explicit. Although there is a long environmental labour history, this is not always linked to the contemporary environmental crisis. In order to do this and raise awareness of the labour: nature relationship, the concept of metabolic rift is helpful in examining different sectors and industries. This could lead to assessments of different sectoral strategies and the environment. A more fundamental question is how trade unions can act to reduce commodification of nature.

How do existing sectoral strategies affect the environment?

What measures can be taken by trade unions to reduce the commodification of nature within sectors and industries?

5. A case study of trade union action

The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) trade union, a UK union, is the biggest public service union representing members working in the civil service, whether in civil service departments or employed by a private company that delivers government services. In 2022, it had a membership of 191,289. It represents workers in all major government departments and those working for government contractors in jobs such as IT, finance, maintenance, security, cleaning and catering including OCS, Capgemini, DXC, Fujitsu, ISS, Atos and Atradius. The main problems facing PCS members are the outsourcing of public services and privatisation. PCS members do not face the immediate results of reduced employment in fossil fuel industries but the goals of net zero will have implications for how the government and the civil service function.

PCS has been chosen to show how a trade union has used a concern for maintaining jobs as a way of developing a wider vision of a just transition. This process has been created partly through the work of two officers who have, over a period of over 15 years, played a key role in making the climate/ environmental crisis a central part of the union agenda. They can be viewed as 'organic intellectuals'.

In 2009, the Campaign Against Climate Change trade union group, of which PCS was a member, and other trade unionists, academics and activists published the 'One Million Jobs Report' as a response to the environmental and economic crisis.

"We want the government to employ a million workers. That means we want the government to start employing 83,300 workers a month and to have employed one million within twelve months."

A 'climate' job was defined as a job that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As such, it is not a 'green' job or one which may already exist, such as an environmental officer or park keeper. 'Climate' jobs would be new jobs created by the government in renewable energy, retrofit and insulation, skills and training, transport, agriculture, education and culture.

This made PCS realise that more was needed than a strategy for jobs. Action had to involve a rethinking of the civil service, public services and future climate services. The 2009 PCS Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) mandated the union to promote the climate jobs campaign and the creation of a National Climate Service.

A National Climate Service was considered a way of implementing this workforce strategy, similar to the National Health Services in 1948. Organic Intellectual A defined it in a discussion document as:

"The National Climate Service is a comprehensive sum of all the parts required to deliver on decarbonisation and biodiversity targets at the pace and scale demanded by the science; its aim is to provide coherence and coordination across government including devolved, regional and local government, that puts economic and social justice for workers and communities at its heart."

By 2023, although the awareness of the need for a National Climate Service has become stronger within PCS, new thinking was required to move the initiative forward. The PCS National Climate Service Working Group commissioned the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) to set out the 'business case' for a National Climate and Bio-Diversity Service (known as NCS) in March 2023. At the initial meeting, there was a sense that after so much time spent discussing the concept of a National Climate Service the committee was excited but slightly unclear about what the report would cover.

Organic Intellectual B explained at the beginning of the project:

"So, government and civil service that works organically as a seamless whole as best to deliver all the various elements of a robust practical plan to get to net zero. In civil service terms, that will mean a complete rejigging of how the civil service works. This research is about how to picture it. Obviously, we've dubbed that the climate change service. But I think, to be honest, we in one sense don't know what that means. And that's the great virtue of your research. It is that you're going to focus our minds and also hopefully direct, in order to deliver, say, home insulation. It will need an organisation to do it now, whether that's a regional organization, or a national company, whether that is, I don't know."

The term 'business case' was interpreted as covering the vision, principles, aims and objectives of a NCS, a needs analysis of current problems by sector and how a NCS could address these. This brief for a 'business case' posed some initial concern for the researchers because it appeared to promote a business-focused analysis and so as a result of discussion within the research team, the term 'business case' was interpreted as economic and social value. This was felt to reflect a move away from economic goals to a just transition.

The process of researching and writing this report was influenced by several factors. Organic Intellectual A had written a background paper, *Developing a vision and aims statement for National Climate Service*, which had been discussed by an internal PCS National Climate Service Working Group.

"We want something more like the way the government used to run the National Health Service. In effect, the government sets up a National Climate Service and the new NCS employs staff to do the work that needs to be done. That way we can be sure it is done. Given what the scientists are telling us, we need to be sure."

The underlying principle of being free at the point of access was informed by the experience of the National Health Service.

The researchers drew from the discussion document along with international research. One member of the research team has previously written a case for a National Care Service and this helped inform the elements of a new public service. The report provided a series of recommendations which placed a National Climate and Bio-Diversity Services within wider public policies for renationalisation, new industrial strategies, collaborative working across government and the use of economic and social value to assess impact, all part of a new just transition strategy.

The draft report was presented to an internal PCS committee in preparation for a fringe meeting at the Annual Delegate Conference (ADC). The report was detailed, and the presentation went on longer than scheduled. It was difficult to assess the initial reception of the report. However, two weeks later, during the ADC fringe meeting, the commitment to using the report to campaign with other trade unions and environmental campaigns was obviously very strong. The report has formed the basis of a new campaign by PCS which is creating alliances with other trade unions and campaigning organisations to lobby for a National Climate Service. It is being used to lobby the Labour Party, with the aim of influencing a future Labour government.

This case study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it shows how the concept of 'organic intellectuals' is useful as a way of explaining how trade union agendas can change, moving from a focus on jobs to a wider vision of new public services and a re-purposed Civil Service. Secondly, it shows how democratic processes within the union are important for raising awareness about new agendas, but these take time and depend on a pragmatic use of opportunities. PCS is now playing a leading role in promoting the case for a National Climate Service and working closely with other sectoral unions. It will not necessarily result in the creation of a National Climate Service during the next government, but it has created the opportunity to work on a progressive solution that would help to alleviate the climate/ environmental crisis. It will have contributed to changing current political thinking, the current hegemony, about how to address the climate/ environmental crisis in the UK.

6.0 Conclusion

If trade unions are to play a role in creating a just transition, their scope for action has to be assessed in relation to the many issues that they face, unrelated to the climate/ environmental crisis. Unions have falling membership rates, partly the result of the growth of privatisation and outsourcing. Systems of workplace democracy are weak in many countries. These factors all contribute to a sense that trade unions lack legitimacy in shaping a future economy and society.

A review of recent literature on how trade unions are working towards a just transition shows that there are several themes that explain some of the strategies which trade unions have adopted. Although many unions still focus on their immediate employment/ jobs prospects and respond to management strategies, there is growing evidence that unions are beginning to adopt wider strategies which will contribute to a just transition. Some have adopted a wider vision which draws in unions from other sectors and campaigning organisations. Others have looked to campaign at several different levels – EU, national, regional, local – acknowledging that policies can be shaped and implemented more widely.

Working on environmental issues often requires raising trade union awareness of nature that has been damaged as part of the capitalist process of extraction. There is a history of trade union environmental justice campaigns but to build just transition policies requires recognition of the role of work in the interface between society and nature.

There is a growing awareness of the need for new expertise, education and training for trade unions working towards a just transition. This has implications for trade unions and employers.

Trade unions have an important role to play in this process, which will build on the research that they have already commissioned. This paper posed the question ‘What areas of expertise do trade unions need to play active roles in creating a just transition?’

An analysis of recent trade union research from an international trade union, a European trade union and a coalition of trade unions showed that they were all commissioning research that addresses major problems for their members but also contributed to a just transition but from different perspectives, for example, public ownership.

The use of Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectuals has shown some of ways in which trade unions change and expand their own expertise. The role of individual trade unionists in this context is important but the way in which trade unionists could function as ‘organic intellectuals’ requires both individual and collective actions.

This paper went on to outline ‘Three Pillars’ as a contribution to trade union thinking and action. The 1st Pillar is the need for a more critical analysis of future ‘tipping points’. The 2nd Pillar is a model of a new economy, called the ‘foundational economy’, which aims to promote the ‘political practice of adaptive reuse’. This will require different types of industry and a wider recognition of the value of public services. The 3rd Pillar encourages a rethinking of the relationship between trade unions and nature. A short research plan highlighted the research questions which could be used to further develop thinking in these areas.

The case study of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) analyses how this union, which is not directly affected by the decline in fossil fuel industries, has placed the climate/environmental crisis as central to its political agenda. This process has been led by two officers who have operated as ‘organic intellectuals’, making themselves better informed and using this expertise to shape union policies and strategies. A National Climate Service is proposed as a solution to the problems of coordinating and delivering services necessary for a just transition.

Future research could examine some of the ways in which trade unions are supporting the development of just transition expertise of their members. Industry and sectoral studies could identify the ways in which trade unions influence strategic planning.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The PCS National Climate Service Working Group commissioned the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU) to set out the business case for a National Climate and Bio-Diversity Service (known as NCS) in March 2023. The author was a member of the team that wrote the report setting out a ‘Business Case’ for a National Climate Service.

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