

THE COP 26 TALKS AND CLIMATE JUSTICE – A BRIEFING FOR TRADE UNIONISTS



This briefing has been produced by trade unionists for climate justice, meeting as the Trade Union Caucus of the COP26 Coalition, to inform trade union activists about the issues which will arise in and around the COP.

Rising harm from climate breakdown already poses a great threat to humanity. Efforts to address the problem will shape the world in the coming decades. So climate chaos is one of the biggest challenges facing humanity and most trade unions have understood its implications for members and their families. Many now have policies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, ensuring a just transition and representing their members both in their workplaces and with governments.

In the UN climate talks and the Paris Agreement which came out of them in 2015, some of these issues are central but it can be hard to find others. Conversely, several issues which are vital to global climate justice and which feature in the UN climate talks are ones on which trade unions have historically had little to say.

Climate Justice



Climate justice is a concept which trade unions are well-placed to understand. Climate disaster is already having negative impacts on some of the poorest of the world's citizens and our most vulnerable communities. Unchecked, its consequences for increasing inequalities will be devastating. The trade union movement has been built around fighting injustice and combating the hardships created by unchecked power of markets and wealth. However many of the climate justice issues

which are debated at the UN climate talks are unfamiliar to most in the movement. This briefing gives a short introduction to them and some comments from a trade union point of view.

What is COP26 in Glasgow?

The UN talks in Glasgow this year are called COP26 because they will be the 26th since the UNFCCC was established. In that quarter century, greenhouse gas emissions have continued rising and climate injustices are intensifying. The trade union movement is familiar with government promises which aren't followed by delivery, as we see here. We expect that trade union activists will want to understand the roots of these failures. Many in our movement argue that these come from the neo-liberalism which dominates global

governance, especially the elevation of ‘market-based mechanisms’ over the needs of humanity.

Just Transition – a trade union idea

In the climate talks the trade union movement has contributed the Just Transition concept. This demands the achievement of climate emissions reduction targets in ways that protect the livelihoods and conditions of workers, thus bringing greater social justice and inclusion. This concept was included in the 2015 Paris Agreement through the efforts of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which has led the Just Transition demand in subsequent COPs.

Beyond Just Transition, the trade union movement has responded to climate change through various proposals -- from a local focus, to a better deal for workers within national policy frameworks, to a transformed global economic system. There is debate within the movement and a willingness to both learn and to bring its own hard-won insights learnt in its struggles for social justice and to defend workers' rights.

WILL THE PLANS HIT THE TARGETS? **THE NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS**

The 2015 Paris Agreement set “pledge” targets to keep the average increase in global temperatures within 2C and aim to limit them to 1.5C. It expects this to be delivered by ‘Nationally Determined Contributions’(NDCs), the plans which every country has to produce. They are all voluntary, with no legal obligation that these achieve any specific targets and no sanctions for failing.

Current national pledges add up to a total that puts the world on track for a calamitous 3-4C warming. Developed countries in particular have failed to make commitments that fulfill scientific and social equity tests. Such a failure to limit warming to 1.5 C degrees will be a disaster for trade union members as workers and as citizens; this will be unjustly imposed on them by the failures of global capitalism.

NDCs summarise governments’ plans to tackle climate change and inadequately contribute to the collective goal of a 1.5C rise. Trade unions should evaluate them and demand government policies to ensure that the targets are achieved in ways that workers’ livelihoods are protected and our economies are made fairer and more inclusive.

Some of these plans mention ‘Just Transition’, but the use of the term in them by governments is generally an empty gesture or green-washing, so far. We have not heard of many examples where trade unions have been involved in their preparation. Workers and their unions must be involved in drafting and negotiating the policies so that they ensure economic and social justice.

We will want to assess whether the NDCs will be effective. If they depend on markets, with some regulation by governments, delivering massive and rapid emissions reductions, they probably won't be. Many trade unions recognise that achieving ambitious social goals needs decisive state intervention, combining public ownership with strict requirements on private companies.

A proper Just Transition Plan will be clear about the anticipated impacts on jobs, pay and conditions. They will set out whether overall they will be regressive or progressive and their impacts on gender and racial inequalities. In global terms it is important to examine whether taken together they can show equity between rich and poor countries in terms of ambition, speed and costs.

CLIMATE FINANCE, LOSS & DAMAGE AND PRE-2020 ACTIONS

The relation between rich countries and the global South is a major theme at the COPs. 2020 was the end of Kyoto Protocol period and assessment of its outcomes at this COP is highly important regarding efforts by rich countries to shift the burden of responsibility for climate action towards developing countries under the Paris Agreement. Supported by the UK and EU, the USA has historically sought to water down the differentiation between rich and poor countries, i.e. between historical polluters and those with little responsibility for causing the climate crisis. Global South countries resist such efforts by developed countries and criticise their lack of climate action.

At the Copenhagen COP (2009) developed countries promised \$100bn per year in **Climate Finance** by 2020 to support developing countries' mitigation and adaptation efforts. This is not being delivered. It should be given as grants but so far is mostly loans. This sum does not adequately reflect what is needed.

While the \$100bn commitment was extended to 2025 at COP21 in Paris, discussions on a new long-term finance goal will start at COP26. Countries from the global South need climate finance to gain the resources and technologies for their own just transitions. Otherwise they are even more likely to be at the mercy of false 'climate solutions' dictated by global markets and multinational companies seeking to extract profit from their resources, populations or development space. Trade union confederations in the global South are urging rich countries to fulfil their promises.

Alongside **Mitigation** – actions to end emissions and limit warming - **Adaptation** to the consequences of climate change is one of the three pillars of the Paris Agreement. Droughts, dust storms, heat waves, cyclones, devastating storms, floods and rising sea levels are already exacerbating economic, social and security threats and it is often the poorest communities and countries which are most vulnerable. Only a small share of climate finance has flowed into adaptation so measures which are necessary to protect affected populations and build resilience are particularly under-resourced. How a new global finance goal can fill the gap in adaptation finance will be an important question for climate justice campaigners.

Compensation for **Loss and Damage**, the third pillar, has been a long-standing climate justice goal for vulnerable and developing countries. The 2015 Paris Agreement enshrines it as 'the third pillar' of international climate action. In 2013 the Warsaw Implementation Mechanism (WIM) was established. However, so far the remit includes only research, dialogue and 'enhancing action and support' to address Loss and Damage. Developing countries demand that this finance and resources must be additional to finance and support for mitigation and adaptation. Loss & Damage negotiations will continue at the Glasgow COP. This is a key demand of the global climate justice movement; trade unions should support it.

CAN TRADE UNIONS RELY ON CARBON MARKETS?

The Paris Agreement allows for carbon markets, under Article 6, the part that Shell boasted it wrote. Carbon markets allow polluters to continue emitting greenhouse gases at a price. At current emissions rates, we run out of carbon budget for a 1.5oC rise in 2025. So there is no time left to trade emissions.

Carbon markets have proven ineffective for their supposed aim. Both the EU Emissions Trading System and the Kyoto Clean Development Mechanism have failed to reduce emissions substantially. Carbon trading favours big finance and private enterprises, while harming the rights of workers, communities and citizens. Within these schemes, carbon offsetting and trading schemes are associated with land grabs and serious human rights abuses, particularly to indigenous peoples. Carbon markets are therefore worse than a distraction from real solutions to the climate crisis and risk fatally undermining the Paris Agreement goals.

The scale and pace of investment needed to meet these goals will not be delivered by the financial markets. There needs to be global economic planning, led by government and public investment. Fiscal rules need to be radically altered to prioritise a Just Transition over elite political priorities.

More generally, 'market-based mechanisms' have dominated climate change policies. They favour big finance and private enterprises and disadvantage workers, communities and the rights of citizens. And they have failed to deliver the necessary changes which we need.

'NET-ZERO' vs REAL ZERO

The Paris Agreement states that: "*Parties aim....to achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century*". On the one hand, this broad definition covers the small number of industrial processes which are hard to decarbonise because CO2 is a product of a chemical process, not combustion (like cement). On the other hand, it also opens the door to reliance on unproven 'negative emissions technologies' to balance national plans which don't actually add up. This enables continued burning of fossil fuels on the basis that one day the resulting emissions will be sequestered, even though technologies like Carbon Capture and Storage may well not work at that scale or in the

timescale needed. Nor does it distinguish between what many view as false solutions and carbon removals through ecosystem restoration, reforestation and peatland.

This idea of 'net zero' is understandably popular with fossil fuel companies and with governments which don't want to take the necessary actions. Net-zero pathways which rely on negative emissions technologies foresee emissions overshooting the carbon budget for 1.5oC and later bringing emissions down, by which time the damage will be done and irreversible. Net-zero targets often rely on offsetting and carbon trading. Hence climate justice groups strongly oppose this use of the net-zero concept. Trade unions should understand these concerns and should subject 'net-zero' proposals and claims to strong scrutiny to ensure that the measures proposed are actually part of a valid path to real zero, and not greenwash.

BIG POLLUTERS INFLUENCE ON COP OUTCOMES

Fossil fuel companies and other big polluters have access to the COP process in much the same way as civil society observers do but their money buys much greater influence, even sponsoring COP spaces. That's why campaigners are calling for the UNFCCC to introduce a conflict-of-interest policy that would bar Big Polluters from influence in climate negotiations and beyond.

In previous COPs, large multinational corporations and their lobbyists have sponsored the talks and got on the inside track of some. The global climate justice movement calls for big polluters to be kept out of the climate talks. In the run-up to the Glasgow COP26, campaigners are calling for the UK to commit to:

- a) take no money from big polluters for sponsoring a COP venue, UK pavilion inside COP and any external UK-Government organised events and spaces;
- b) give no UK Party badges to representatives of big polluters;
- c) invite no big polluters to sit on their panels or speak at their events,
- d) reject sharing a platform with any big polluters invited by others; and
- d) push for a conflict-of-interest policy at the UNFCCC.

JUST TRANSITION

The Paris Agreement includes Just Transition in its Preamble: "Taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities." In 2016 the UNFCCC Secretariat published a paper to inform this aspect of its remit and give advice to governments on how to approach the just transition at national level and in 2017 it was included in a programme of work on Response Measures. These are the main extent of where Just Transition features in the official proceedings. However, beyond the formal negotiations, Just Transition is a big issue in side events and wider activities around the COP.

Just transition is a narrative which can take on board the calls for climate justice through having an international as well as a national framing. However in the global South there is some concern that Just Transition and Green New Deal narratives, as articulated by global North governments and parts of civil society, may fail to address issues of global justice and global South needs. Specifically they should include measures which recognise that the heritage of colonialism has caused racial inequalities as regards the impacts and costs of climate breakdown. Similarly plans for just transition should take into account the unequal burden shared by women.

Trade unionists looking at the COP's proceedings for the important issues may look in vain, for instance, for mandatory decarbonisation by big polluters, Just Transition plans for sectors and enterprises, public ownership over energy systems and measures for social and economic justice. On the one hand, those matters are thought to be concerns of individual countries. On the other hand, the market-based approach of the Paris Agreement, with its failure to require multinational corporations to comply with climate change targets, creates practical obstacles to a Just Transition.

Talk about just transition is easy, as we see from the governments and now also private companies which have started to scatter the term Just Transition around their policy documents - often without any mention of workers or trade unions. However, actually delivering a Just Transition will need strength and determination by the trade union movement and its allies to force their governments to take the urgent actions needed, while calling out any failures to deliver on promises about green jobs. Trade unionists, with their allies in the climate justice movement, should check their governments' climate change plans and NDCs for these key elements:-

1. meeting the targets of ending greenhouse gas emissions/zero carbon
2. economic planning to make the necessary changes happen, fast enough
3. sectoral plans, and enterprise conversion plans
4. public funding at the scale needed and action by all public agencies
5. protecting livelihoods of workers and creating alternatives for those dependent on fossil fuels
6. support for workers with a clear offer including retraining and upskilling
7. creating enough jobs and of the right quality
8. regulatory requirements and conditions for private companies
9. ensuring sufficient finance and investment flows
10. protection of the communities economically dependent on fossil fuels
11. fair distribution of the costs of the transition and the benefits
12. fair shares of effort and cost across the planet
13. social justice benefits – integration of measures which make society more inclusive
14. education, skills for Just Transition, ensuring the labour supply needed
15. participation in the processes by workers and unions (including social dialogue) and agreement on the importance of workplace green representatives
16. promoting public control and collective ownership of resources and infrastructure
17. social protection and the rights which underpin the Just Transition

To ensure those elements will require building wide alliances and a popular movement powerful enough to make governments take the actions needed.

CONCLUSIONS

This briefing document has introduced the UN's global framework and the main issues relevant to actions at any level, in order to inform them all. To help achieve a Just Transition and avoid false solutions, trade-union members can take action at several levels: to strengthen the policies of their union, to press their governments to adopt those policies, to join or form local coalitions and to mobilise around COP26, preferably with other parts of the global justice movement. Trade unions often have more material resources than other parts of the movement at home and abroad and should explore using some of these to make sure the most excluded - often the most affected - also have a voice.

This briefing has been produced by the Trade Union Caucus which comprises union representatives and activists for climate justice who have come together as part of the of the COP26 Coalition. It will be updated if necessary - this initial version is dated May 2021