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What workers want: Conditions for a fair and just transition in the UK

Climate Evidence Unit

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Summary

There is cynicism amongst UK workers that the transition to a low carbon economy will lead to high quality, local jobs, with over a third considering local job losses likely.[1]

There is a threefold need for managed decarbonisation: to meet national emissions targets, to mitigate against political backlash, and to revitalise local and regional economies. The complexity of realising the low carbon transition and its potential risks to employment highlight the importance of including workers and their representatives in planning.

This briefing synthesises wide-ranging research from the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change (CERIC) which points to conditions for a low carbon transition, from the perspectives of both workers and those who represent them. We recommend that the UK government learns from international example to ensure oversight and fairness in the transition and reap the co-benefits that a managed transition can provide.

Context

A large proportion of those currently in work will be part of the workforce required to meet net zero targets, with over 20 million UK workers aged 49 or under.[2]

The main risks from a low carbon transition are to workers in carbon-intensive industries, with estimates suggesting half of these workers would be affected by changes to their employment.[3]

Given workers are directly implicated in the low carbon transition, it is important to understand their perspectives and preferences. With a quarter of all UK workers represented by a trade union,[4] unions are also key stakeholders for a) understanding how the low carbon transition can be fair to workers; b) increasing worker acceptance of decarbonisation proposals and policies; and c) delivering some of the changes workers wish to see (e.g. carbon literacy training).

Previous, unmanaged, transitions have resulted in a lasting legacy of deprivation in affected communities.

For instance, former coalfield communities to this day suffer the socioeconomic effects of mine closures, with poorer health, employment and productivity outcomes relative to the rest of the country. An estimated 44% of coalfield communities are among the most deprived 30% in England.[5]

The industrial restructuring required for the low carbon transition has a spatial pattern, with some UK regions more at risk of changes to employment. For instance, the manufacturing industries concentrated in the North and Midlands are more at risk, whilst the service sector is concentrated in London and the South East and may be less affected.[6] In the steel sector, over a third of jobs are found in Northern England.[7] Respecting communities adversely affected by past transitions will be a hallmark of any just transition in the future.

Methods

This briefing draws on several projects from CERIC, including the following:

- A survey of 2,001 UK workers[8] assessing how they view the climate crisis, whether they feel ready to work in the green economy or develop green skills, and their response to policy options for a fair and just transition. The survey, conducted in spring 2022, included a nationally representative sample across economic sectors, age, ethnicity, gender and region. Results were compared for union versus non-union members, and workers in high and low-emission sectors. The results of this survey were compared to a similar survey and sample of German workers.[9]
- A survey of 53 steel industry members of the trade union (Community) conducted in 2021.[10]
- 200 interviews conducted as part of the 'Just Transitions – A Global Exploration' project, which seeks to compare international evidence on policies to ensure a just transition across 14 countries. This included a case study of the UK, involving 35 interviews with representatives of trade unions, green NGOs, and other transition experts from England, Scotland and Wales conducted between 2023 and 2024.[11, 12]. It also involved desk-based research.
- The 'Just Transitions – A Global Exploration' project provides case study evidence referenced in this briefing from Spain, Germany and Canada, and is based on interviews conducted in each of these countries (n=11 in Spain, n=25 in Germany, and n=18 in Québec, Canada at the time of writing).

The following synthesises the findings from these projects to draw overarching conclusions about the conditions that are required for a just transition, from the perspective of a) labour representatives, and b) workers. We conclude by highlighting a series of recommendations for UK government in supporting a just transition for workers, by drawing on evidence from international comparison.

Conditions for a just transition

Trade unions:

1. Early participation, inclusion and coordination

2. Clarity of government policy around industrial decarbonisation

3. Recognising green union representatives and improving their capacity

Workers:

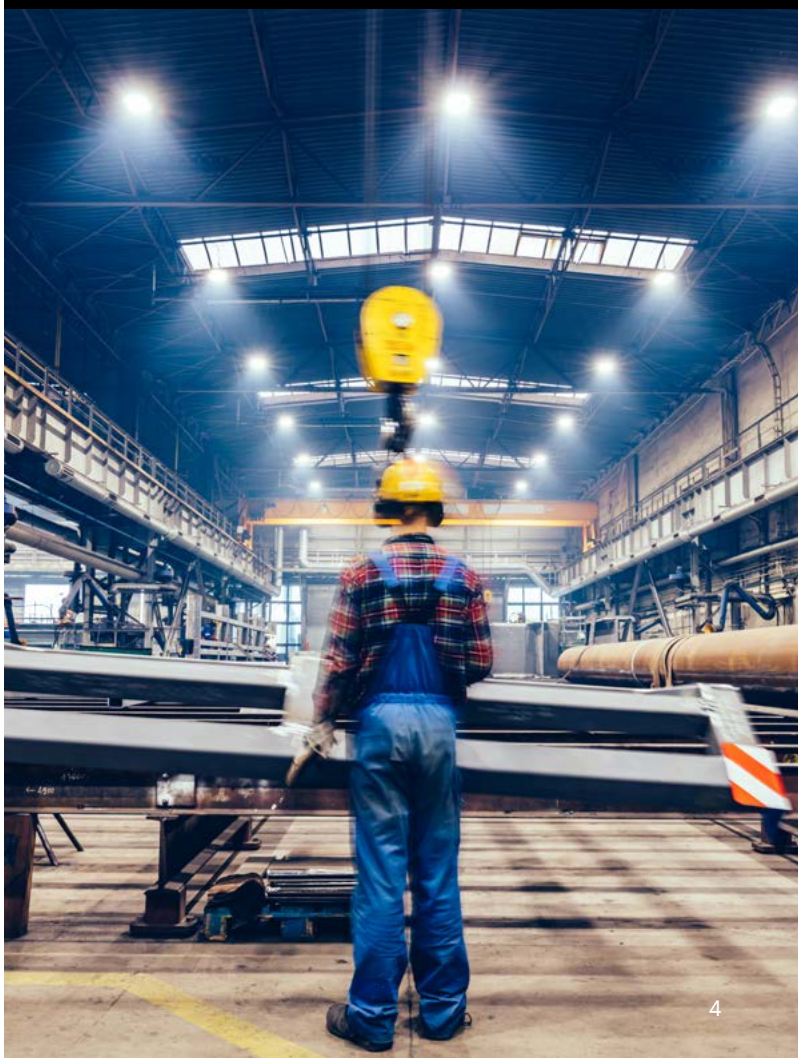
1. Maintaining or creating local, meaningful, quality jobs

2. Improving training infrastructure to provide guidance, support and funded reskilling

3. Building capacity to engage with workplace decarbonisation planning

Joint condition:

Jobs are created for people and places most affected by transition



Conditions for a just transition: Trade unions

Key recommendations identified by trade union representatives included the following:

1. Early participation, inclusion and coordination

The early involvement of unions in coordinated attempts at transition planning was seen as valuable. Given a lack of formal institutions for unions to engage with around climate and jobs at a national level, unions have tended to develop alternative relationships. Instead, there is a need for institutionalised collaboration between unions and other stakeholders, coordinated at a national level and integrated across government departments. For instance, recent transition plans set out by the Scottish Just Transition Commission for the Grangemouth refinery closure have been praised for the inclusion of unions and have highlighted the value of this kind of national coordinating body.[13]

2. Clarity of government policy around industrial decarbonisation

Union representatives wished to see a more defined vision of the green economy set out by government and signalled through well-designed infrastructural policies. For instance, clearer government strategy around industrial decarbonisation would enable unions to better plan around managing possible impacts to the workers they represent. A recent report by the Association for Decentralised Energy (ADE) stated that 770,000 jobs are potentially at risk due to a lack of planning for the decarbonisation of sites outside industrial clusters.[14]

UK industrial electricity prices are some of the highest in Europe challenging the global competitiveness of UK manufacturing,[15] and problematising electrification as a route to decarbonising industry. In 2023, over half of industrial energy consumption was provided by fossil fuels.[16]

The UK's recently published Industrial Strategy[17] has a strong focus on reducing industrial electricity costs. Delivering on this clearer direction would provide greater certainty for transition planning. For instance in the steel sector, the transition to electrified production is contingent on the availability of cheap electricity. Addressing these concerns would support unions in their support of workers.

3. Recognising green union representatives and improving their capacity

'Green' or environmental representatives now feature in many UK trade unions. Though this role can promote fairness in workplace decarbonisation planning it is not formally recognised. Recognition through legislation around workplace representation would ringfence these roles. Mandating these kinds of roles (even in non-unionised workplaces) would ensure worker voices on environmental issues are heard and represented in company transition plans.

Conditions for a just transition: Workers

Recommendations identified by workers consisted of the following:

1. Maintaining or creating local, meaningful, quality jobs

Only 38% of UK workers surveyed thought the green economy would bring better quality jobs to their community.[18] The perception that green jobs are lower quality jobs was a concern of UK workers; for instance, 33% of UK survey respondents suggested that perceived lower levels of pay would hold them back from a job move to the green economy.[19] They repeatedly expressed the need for meaningful, good quality jobs to be either maintained or created under the low carbon transition. 'Good quality' involved similar pay and working conditions as a minimum. A related call was for job guarantees in industries which need to restructure, with no forced redundancies. Many workers (including steelworkers)[20] also expressed the need for local jobs, with a quarter of workers assuming they would need to change jobs or relocate as a result of the low carbon transition.[21]

Many workers expressed the need for local jobs

2. Improving training infrastructure to provide guidance, support and funded reskilling

A core concern of the UK workers surveyed was around skills, with 40% of respondents assuming they would need to learn new skills to be employed in the green economy.[22] UK workers valued their existing skills far lower than German workers, which can be attributed to the stronger skills support and vocational training available in Germany. Steel sector union members also expressed the need for free training in order to reskill.[23] Improvements to skills support could involve better provision of career guidance, support to find new jobs, and funded training for reskilling (avoiding the personal time and cost commitments often imposed on workers). Building the UK's skills and vocational training infrastructure would provide agency to workers in planning their careers in the green economy as well as countering the perception of poor quality green jobs.

3. Building capacity to engage with workplace decarbonisation planning

Of those workers that were aware of organisational decarbonisation plans, 48% reported that they had been consulted on those plans (with only 28% reporting significant levels of consultation).[24] When it came to influencing these plans, 24% felt they had significant influence over them, and 20% had received significant training relevant to delivering the plans.[25] To improve the fairness of organisational transition planning, there is therefore a need for both improving levels of consultation with workers and building the capacity of workers to help deliver these plans through appropriate training. This training could manifest through awareness raising and training to ensure carbon literacy. This kind of environmental capacity-building points to a role for unions, and particularly strengthening the role of green reps. Levels of consultation and training around decarbonisation have been shown to be greater for union members in the so-called 'union effect'.[26]

Jobs are created for people and places most affected by transition

A common condition for a just transition which echoed throughout both union and worker perspectives was the need for jobs to be created for the people and places most affected by past and future transitions to a green economy. This echoes findings from other studies which suggest that certain groups of workers such as those with fewer qualifications and in communities with less access to training and new jobs are the most likely to be negatively affected by economic restructuring under the green transition.[27]

The green transition presents an opportunity to reduce inequality in communities that have faced deindustrialisation, and these communities were frequently pointed to as ones that should be engaged with and supported throughout the transition.

Learning from international experience

1. Improving the skills infrastructure underpinning worker transitions

An estimated 3 million UK workers will need to reskill as part of the low carbon transition.[28] As noted, UK workers had concerns over the need to learn new skills to transition to green employment. Workers often face barriers to entry into green sectors such as offshore wind, including the cost of completing training and accreditation to demonstrate the skills they already have.[29] New public bodies such as the Office for Clean Energy Jobs mark a positive step in ensuring UK workers have the right skills for the transition to a green economy, but lessons can be learnt from both international and domestic experience in this space.

As part of the North Sea Transition Plan, 'Skills Passports' were introduced early this year. This allows for some of the accredited competencies of oil and gas workers to be recognised in the offshore sector.[30] Extending the passports scheme to further sectors would promote wider opportunity for oil and gas workers seeking to switch to green employment. However, the passports scheme as currently structured is not as comprehensive as oil and gas workers have indicated as being needed to support the transition, specifically the scheme is not as focused on worker competencies as originally envisaged.[31] Furthermore, the Offshore Co-ordinating Group of trade unions suggested the passports alone would not be sufficient with the need for additional plans to protect 'incomes, trade union rights, and safety standards.'[32] There is further critique that the passport doesn't ensure financial support for retraining.[33] A recent government consultation ('Building the North Sea's energy future') does point towards potential reform and expansion of the passports scheme.[34]

Other countries offer examples of how green skills are integrated into existing vocational education and training structures. For instance, Germany has seen the introduction of the *Transformationskurzarbeit* scheme which funds green upskilling, with workers released from employment to complete short-term training.[35] In the Canadian province of Québec, the government is similarly funding green upskilling by covering training costs and compensating wages.[36] The question of 'who pays' for green up- or re-skilling is one yet to be answered in the UK.

2. Investing in institutions across scales to provide long-term oversight

Joined-up oversight of the transition, including formalised relationships between relevant stakeholders (including, critically, unions) is seen as necessary for ensuring fairness. Our research proposes the need for institutions at different scales, and ensuring that networking occurs between them. This is true for the national level, but more coordination is needed internationally as well. We also suggest the need for a Global Observatory of Just Transition Initiatives and more international cooperation between workers.[37]

a. National

There are calls for national institutions to manage the effects of transition, for instance modelled on the Scottish Just Transition Commission, but with more substantive resourcing and a commitment to long-term collaboration.

Union 'knowledge regimes' can be defined as the collective system of organisations, actors and evidence they are able to draw upon to advocate for workers across different industries. The nature of union 'knowledge regimes' varies significantly between countries. For instance, Germany's Hans Böckler Stiftung is a foundation dedicated to supporting research around work conducted on behalf of the Confederation of German Trade Unions (and has funded research by authors of this briefing)[38]. A well-funded, independent think tank of this kind in the UK could facilitate knowledge and best-practice sharing between UK unions and underpin evidence-based planning and decision-making on behalf of their members.

b. Regional

The Principality of Asturias in northwest Spain (a coal-producing region) has established a regional Just Transition Observatory.[39] Since 2019 this has been a medium for public-private dialogue and cooperation between regional government, NGOs, unions, employers, local government, and universities.[40] The Observatory's success has led to the European Commission's proposed development of an EU Fair Transitions Observatory.[41]

An equivalent Observatory in the UK could work to bring together relevant data, resources, and case studies of successful transitions from the numerous individual analyses by unions, think tanks and universities that currently exist.[42] A more systematic understanding of the effects of transition on different sectors, places, and workers would create greater confidence in future planning and ensure it is evidence-based.

c. Local

There is a need for 'Local Green Jobs and Just Transition' bodies - or 'network hubs' - which engage with employers, unions and workers to translate how initiatives around net zero will affect workers and local opportunities. These bodies are developing in the UK, but learning around best practice needs to be shared.[43]

Notably, workers in the UK and Germany also supported greater resourcing of local government to ensure there is local provision of support around training and skills.[44] This highlights the importance of having institutions at different scales to effectively coordinate support for workers.

3. Including workers and unions in government and company decision-making

As well as the risks of not including worker and union perspectives (as previously discussed in the case of past unjust transitions in the UK), the co-benefits of inclusion should be recognised. For instance, unions have the ability to encourage worker acceptance of decarbonisation initiatives. The new Office for Clean Energy Jobs, the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and Skills England all identify the need to work with unions.[45]

Trade unions have a key role in Spain's Just Transition Agreements for Coal Power Plants. These agreements are an important mechanism for ensuring ongoing support for workers impacted by the closure of coal plants. They are collaboratively negotiated between workers, employers, the government and unions. Unions ensure compliance with the agreements in conjunction with the government and owners of the plants.[46] These local agreements have led to strong local political consensus around the closures.

Germany's Works Constitution Act (*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*) determines the rights of workers in forming 'work councils' (company-level representation of workers that can be independent of unions). Proposed reforms to the Act include extending the 'co-determination rights' to a new area of business, which is the ability of employees to influence decisions made by their employer. In practice this means drawing upon worker knowledge to determine low carbon production techniques and requiring an environmental committee in companies with 100 or more employees.[47]

In Québec, Canada, organisational 'Just Transition laboratories' have been proposed by the *Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec* (FTQ; or Québec Federation of Labour). These laboratories ensure that 'green clauses' are embedded within collective agreements and guide the development of pro-environmental company practice.[48] This ensures the representation of workers' voices within union agreed changes to company practice.

Call to action

Expensive, ad-hoc support packages after the exit of private industry are only a sticking plaster for the socioeconomic harm to local communities from deindustrialisation.

For instance, such an approach is evident in recent government funding worth £200 million to support the former oil refinery in Grangemouth,[49] and £500 million for Port Talbot steelworks' transition to electric production.[50] Instead of the reactive allocations of funds to compensate unemployed workers, government needs to set out – and critically, fund - a more pro-active and coordinated plan for transition (as indicated by the recent publication of the UK's Industrial Strategy). The intentional involvement of unions would promote worker buy-in and could smooth the political path to transition. The UK must learn from previous domestic experience as well as new international evidence to avoid repeating unjust transitions of the past. Meeting worker and union conditions for a just transition will ensure that it is fair, socially acceptable and ultimately, more successful.

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