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**JUST TRANSITION:
FROM AWARENESS
TO WORKER
ACTION**

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The fight for climate justice is no longer about
the environment: our lives are also at stake

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IN THE MIDST OF THE COVID CRISIS, KENYAN UNIONS ARE ATTEMPTING TO TACKLE THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY HEAD ON

BY MAINA WARURU



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Villagers cross receding waters in an area of flash flooding at Solai in Subukia, Nakuru County on 10 May 2018. There has been an increasing in floods in Kenya's Rift Valley over the past four years. In 2020, more than 5,000 people were displaced at Lake Baringo alone.

“In creating green champions, our aim is to come up with environmental experts at the trade union level and to build the capacity for participation and in advocating for a just transition in Kenya.”

After 18 months of lockdowns, closed borders, grounded flights and travel restrictions, the global tourism industry is still reeling from the impact of Covid-19. One of the countries where this devastation has been most keenly felt is Kenya. Prior to the pandemic, the tourism industry accounted for 4.4 per cent of Kenya's GDP and every year it welcomed over two million visitors. However, 2020 saw [a 72 per cent reduction in tourist arrivals](#) to Kenya, costing the industry an estimated US\$1 billion in revenue.

But even before the pandemic, Kenya's tourism industry was attempting to weather another storm: climate change. Over the past few years, trade unionist Susan Wanjiru has watched in shock as scores of fellow members of the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA) have lost their jobs due to the closure of lakeside hotels in the country's Great Rift Valley, one of Kenya's main tourism hubs.

The closures witnessed over the past four years are a result of rising water levels on

the lakes, most notably around Lakes Baringo and Naivasha, caused by unusually heavy rainfall, land use changes and the loss of wetlands. At Lake Baringo, floods displaced more than 5,000 people in 2020.

“During the floods, we see hotels, homes and roads get submerged. Some of the hoteliers are unable to recover from the flooding so they are forced to close their business. This means the workers lose their jobs,” says Wanjiru, who is the branch secretary for KUDHEIHA in Nakuru, Kenya’s fourth largest city based in the Great Rift Valley.

“Over the last two years, various training and workplace actions have taken place to help both workers and employers learn to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change and to increase environmental awareness”

And away from the lakes, at the world-famous Masai Mara game reserve, the impact of climate change can be felt there too, with erratic rainfall and prolonged periods of drought contributing to declining wildlife populations. “We have seen jobs threatened at the Mara and the reduction of water volumes in the Mara River owing to degradation of the Mau Water Tower. The wildebeest migration has been greatly affected leading to low tourist turn out. This has hit many workers and livelihoods hard,” Wanjiru notes.

The situation has not only left her union with reduced membership (of 2,000 KUDHEIHA members in the Rift Valley area, at least 77 have lost their jobs in the past two years, she says), but it has also left former employees in the hospitality industry without an income, which puts their families and communities at great risk.

■ PARTNERSHIP, OUTREACH AND ACTION

Motivated by a desire to educate her colleagues and their communities about the consequences of climate change and what can be done to prevent, mitigate or adapt to the worst effects, two years ago Wanjiru was designated a ‘green champion’ in KUDHEIHA. “Kenya is highly dependent on climate-sensitive natural resources – such as the forests, the coast, the lakes, both marine and land wildlife – for the livelihoods of millions of people. With the changing climate conditions, we are very vulnerable,” she cautions.

Her role as a climate awareness advocate includes efforts to mainstream just transition and climate policy strategy throughout Kenya’s trade union movement. Kenya’s trade unions have

been working on such efforts since 2016, including an earlier partnership with the Danish International Development Agency. The work of the unions received a huge boost in 2019, when Kenya’s national trade union centre, the Central Organization of Trade Unions Kenya (COTU-K), formed a partnership with the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to build the understanding and capacity of trade unions on climate issues. At a sectoral level, KUDHEIHA has been doing similar work with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF).

Over the last two years, various training and workplace actions have taken place to help both workers and employers learn to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change and to increase environmental awareness. Initiatives have included partnering with hotel managers in the Great Rift Valley to plant trees, participating in beach clean-ups, sensitising tourists to water and energy conservation and the banning of plastic bags from wildlife parks.

Robert Muthami, a programme coordinator at FES Kenya, says his organisation has been working with COTU-K workers in sectors spanning energy, health, hospitality, tourism and manufacturing to support efforts towards energy transition, as well as working on policy. “We have assisted workers’ unions in drafting a just transition framework for Kenya which provides a guideline for effective negotiations without any gaps. In the past, the voice of the workers has been missing,” he tells *Equal Times*.

The unions have also been lobbying business leaders in the hospitality sector to invest in green infrastructure such as renewable energy. This has already produced positive results: “During various trips to the national parks we have engaged with the managers of the different tourist establishments,” says Wanjiru. “Thanks to our sensitisation, most of the hotels that we represent have installed solar panels for their energy needs. Some have also updated their power sys-



© AFP/Tony Karumba

Between 85 and 90 per cent of Kenya's electricity supply comes from renewable sources, such as the Masinga hydro-electricity power approximately 230 kilometres north of Nairobi, which makes it the East African regional leader in clean energy.

tems so that air conditioners and lights automatically switch off once the guest leaves their rooms.”

With the support of COTU-K and FES, KUDHEIHA has also been working for the inclusion of a climate change clause in the hotel sector's collective bargaining agreement (CBA), which is currently under review. This, Wanjiru observes, will bring more “ownership and commitment” to climate issues for both workers and employers.

But at the worker-level, Wanjiru, who is one of approximately 20 green champions in the Kenyan labour movement, says she has experienced an extremely positive response to these outreach initiatives, mainly because “each one of us has at some point already suffered from the effects of climate change”.

“Each one of us has at some point already suffered from the effects of climate change”

Muthami of the FES says there were some initial challenges in the attempts to mainstream climate action in Kenya's trade union movement: “Building a mass within the movement to champion the just transition concept has not been easy. And unions still need to do more to build alliances with other actors such as civil society,” he advises.

BUILDING AN ARMY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERTS AT THE TRADE UNION LEVEL

As a COTU-K affiliate, KUDHEIHA has also been part of the critical mass that is pushing for an amendment of the Kenya Climate Change Act 2016 to provide for inclusion of COTU-K as a part of the National Climate Change Council.

“Workers can help influence national policies to enhance decent work and ensure a sustainable work environment for workers



© AFP/Simon Maina

Passengers heading to board walk past a picture of a giraffe on 1 August 2020 at the Jomo Kenyatta international airport in Nairobi as Kenya Airways airline resumed flights to Britain after flights had been cancelled during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak.

in both the formal and informal economies, as well as for the good of society as a whole,” says Rebecca Okello, a climate policy advisor at COTU-K.

“Workers can help influence national policies to enhance decent work and ensure a sustainable environment for workers in both the formal and informal economies, as well as for the good of society as a whole”

Until now, trade unions have been left out of the council, which not only locks workers out of policy formulation but also impacts the implementation of climate strategies. But as much as the unions are calling for greater social dialogue with the government, efforts to create a ‘green movement’ within the affiliates of COTU-K, have been going well; there are now two green representatives trained within each affiliated union.

“The aim is to come up with environmental experts at the trade union level and to build the capacity for participation and in advocating for a just transition in Kenya. We also hope to enhance

workers’ understanding of the relationship between environmental protection policies and workplace conditions,” Okello tells *Equal Times*.

With training supported by FES, another objective is to ensure that trade unionists at all levels can include climate issues in all negotiations that they take part in, thus expanding beyond the traditional focus on pay and workplace conditions.

“We trust that we are building an army of trade unionists that are well-versed in the modern ways of organising workers around emerging issues, and who have the capacity to negotiate all-round CBAs with employers and authorities,” Okello says. This, she says, is producing positive results for COTU-K affiliates such as KUDHEIHA and the Kenya Electrical Trades and Allied Workers Union (KETAWU).

“Already we are seeing a huge improvement in the capacity for union leaders to engage in broader work and climate issues. As well

as promoting a green and just transition for sustainable development, they are also better able to offer analysis of national legislation such as Kenya's Nationally Determined Commitments (NDCs) and the implementation of trade union responses," the officer observes. However, there is still some way to go before this increased union knowledge has a purposeful impact on national policy: in the most recent update of Kenya's NDCs ([from December 2020](#)) there is only a cursory mention of just transition.

■ KENYA: A REGIONAL CHAMPION IN RENEWABLES

Still, there is much to celebrate in Kenya. Between 85 and 90 per cent of Kenya's electricity supply comes from renewable (mainly hydroelectric and geothermal) sources which makes it the East African regional leader in clean energy. Ernest Nadome is the assistant secretary general of COTU-K and general secretary of KETAWU, a trade union at the heart of Kenya's energy sector. He says it is crucial for unions to make sure that workers have the right skills to meaningfully participate in a just transition.

He says KETAWU is working hard on skilling and reskilling workers "so that they are not caught off-guard in the shift". Nadome also notes that this August, Kenya's power producer, the Kenya Electricity Generating Company (KenGen), became the first company in Africa to earn more than US\$3.8 million in carbon credits from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for [various clean energy projects](#), thanks

in part – Nadome insists – to the company's appropriately skilled personnel.

Workers in the energy sector have been ensuring that hydropower stations are free of silt and have been volunteering to plant trees in water catchment areas in a bid to stop soil erosion (which results in silt inside the hydro dams, thus reducing their capacity to generate electricity). Nadome describes a deal reached with the National Industrial Training Authority to introduce a course to train solar energy technicians as the "biggest win for the union so far" as this will help create skilled workers for one of the fast-growing areas of the green economy.

"Our union KETAWU is the single most important trade union that is involved in the energy sector. As such we are the people behind Kenya's impressive shift to clean energy. Our participation in climate initiatives has ensured that while the government has frozen employment [because of the coronavirus lockdowns] none of our members have been sent home," he adds.



© BSIP via AFP

Wildebeest at sunset at the Maasai Mara game reserve in Kenya where erratic rainfall and prolonged periods of drought caused by climate change are contributing to declining wildlife populations. This, in turn, is leading to reduced numbers of tourists, which is impacting jobs and livelihoods.

COSTA RICA, A WELL-KNOWN AND APPLAUDED ENVIRONMENTAL MODEL, IS FACED WITH LESSER KNOWN BUT MAJOR CHALLENGES

BY FABRICE LE LOUS



© Fabrice Le Lous

Around 33 per cent of the electricity supply is generated by five hydropower plants: Reventazón, Angostura, Arenal, Miguel Dengo and Cachi.

Although Costa Rica is widely applauded for its environmental policies, it is lagging behind in other areas linked to the environment, such as the just transition.

As the year 2021 draws to an end, Costa Rica is collecting international accolades for its environmental achievements. On 17 October, the Central American country received the [Earthshot Prize](#) in the Protect and Restore Nature category for its Payment for Environmental Services (PES) scheme.

The scheme has benefited some 19,000 families since its inception, has mobilised US\$524 million (about €450 million) in conservation projects covering over 1.3 million hectares, and has

contributed to increasing the country's forest cover from 47 per cent at the beginning of the year 2000 to 59 per cent today.

On 13 October, the English band Coldplay announced plans to start its world tour in Costa Rica, on environmental grounds, given the country's status as a global "model" in terms of laws that protect the planet and, above all, for its electricity grid powered by 100 per cent renewable energy. One of the features for which Costa Rica is best known around the world is the fact that all the electricity produced in the country is from renewable sources.

The *Washington Post* recently published a [profile article on Andrea Meza](#), Costa Rica's environment minister, applauding the fact that such a small nation – covering just over 52,000 square kilometres – is a global example in terms of environmental protection. “Meza is now tasked with showing the world whether a small, developing country like hers can overcome these challenges and rebuild its economy in a way that protects the climate. If Costa Rica can do it, what's stopping much bigger and wealthier countries from following its lead?”, the US newspaper asked.

When we refer, however, to ‘environmental protection’, we should not limit ourselves to the protection of forests and renewable electricity sources. Although these are fields in which Costa Rica has excelled for decades, there are other areas, lesser known but just as crucial to the health of the planet, where Costa Rica is lagging behind. One of them is the [just labour transition](#), in the context of projects that, in 2021, following the pandemic, seem overly ambitious.

“The energy sector associated with the mobility of people and freight is the greatest challenge in the decarbonisation plan: electric mobility and public transport are the two biggest challenges in terms of achieving energy system transformation and a just transition”

HOW DID COSTA RICA TRANSFORM ITS ELECTRICITY GRID?

Costa Rica's electricity grid is entirely fuelled by renewable energies. Hydroelectric plants are the main source, but there is also a significant portion of geothermal and biomass energy, as well as more recently integrated wind, solar and biogas power.

Around 33 per cent of the electricity supply is generated by five hydropower plants: Reventazón, Angostura, Arenal, Miguel Dengo and Cachí. This is nothing new. The country's first hydroelectric plants were built in the 1950s by the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE).

Lawrence Pratt, former director of the Latin American Centre for Competitiveness and Sustainable Development (CLACDS) and professor of sustainable development and environmental business strategy at the INCAE Business School in Costa Rica, tells *Equal Times* that they are the result of the good foresight shown by decision-makers in the past.

“It was in the 1950s when Costa Rica decided that it didn't have nor would it ever have enough foreign currency to continue buying and importing oil to generate electricity. Since we have so many mountain ranges and so many fast-flowing rivers, hydropower was the obvious choice. And then geothermal energy came along. It was a good choice for Costa Rica. The oil price shocks of 1973, 1979, 2007, etc., had less impact. (...) Now, with the concerns about climate change, Costa Rica seems visionary,” says Pratt.

As Marco Vinicio Zamora, coordinator of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) Socio-Ecological Transformation Project for Central America explains, ICE workers were able to secure a gradual just labour transition for themselves over the years during which the hydropower plants were opened, thanks to the trade union front representing the thousands of ICE workers.

Today, the ICE does not only have one trade union but a broad labour front with unions representing workers by trade, such as manual labourers' unions, engineers' unions, etc.

“The development of the ICE as an institution and as a company responsible for electricity generation plans has been accompanied by strong union organising and the defence of labour rights, in the public sector. But we also have to take into consideration the conditions of workers in the private electricity generation sector, which has a strong anti-union tradition and takes advantage of the various forms of labour outsourcing, especially in the area of construction,” underlines Zamora.

In present-day Costa Rica, the trade union tradition is almost exclusively limited to the public sector, which employs 15 per cent of the country's workforce. The private sector, which employs 85 per cent of workers, has next to no trade unions. This represents a real challenge in terms of ensuring a just transition in the future, precisely due to the growing outsourcing trend.

It is also important to note that although Costa Rica's electricity supply comes from renewable sources, not all of the energy consumed in the country is electric. The largest part, in fact, corresponds to land transport. And here, imported fossil fuels continue to reign supreme.

According to a [study](#) published by the FES in 2016, the main source of energy in Costa Rica in 2015, taking into account the primary domestic supply and imports, was petroleum derivatives: "The primary domestic supply in Costa Rica is extracted from renewable sources, but more than 70 per cent of the secondary energy supply comes from non-renewable sources, mainly petroleum derivatives, obtained through imports," says the study.

These are not the kind of facts often highlighted in foreign media reports about the Central American country. And yet this is one of the major challenges facing Costa Rica.

■ AN AMBITIOUS PLAN FOR THE FUTURE: 'DECARBONISING' THE COUNTRY

In 2018, Costa Rica launched a plan to 'decarbonise' its economy, in which it promises a [just transition](#). For now, it is all there in black and white but there has been no attempt to approach the public

workers' unions. The lack of unions in the private sector also risks undermining this transition. And accomplishing it within just over three decades is already a challenge in itself, the aim being to [achieve macro changes by 2050](#), such as replacing the current public and private vehicle fleet with an electric one, developing better energy policies and improving environmental sustainability in the agri-food sector.

"The energy sector associated with the mobility of people and freight is the greatest challenge in the decarbonisation plan: electric mobility and public transport are the two biggest challenges in terms of achieving energy system transformation and a just transition," says Marco Vinicio Zamora of FES Costa Rica.

In the recent past, the businesses running the public transport sector have been reluctant to adopt basic changes, such as electronic fare collection, which would improve price regulation. They have also criticised



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Costa Rican Government announced on Thursday, March 5, 2020 the launching of a pilot plan to electrify its public transportation in buses.



© Fabrice Le Lous

Tourism and ecotourism services are some of the strengths of the Costa Rican economy.

the government's project for a high-speed electric train, which seeks to add to the public transport supply in the country's four largest cities by linking it with the bus route network, which has not been redesigned for decades and is now obsolete.

“As an example, Costa Rica is important. Electricity from renewable sources is just one interesting aspect, along with 35 per cent of its land being protected, its reputation for ecotourism, the moratorium on mining and oil exploration”

According to the International Labour Organization, the fundamental principles of a just transition include maximising the creation of green jobs, decent work and sustainable enterprises, minimising job destruction and supporting workers who lose their jobs, along with communities adversely affected by the changes.

All of this has to go hand in hand with social dialogue. And despite the Costa Rican government's talk of a just transition in

its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), talks with trade union organisations are conspicuous by their absence.

Fanny Sequeira Mata, general secretary of the Rerum Novarum workers' confederation, the CTRN, which is affiliated to three international trade union organisations, tells *Equal Times*: “To date, the CTRN has not been invited to take part in any government initiative for a just transition. There is no social dialogue framework for holding consultations, discussions or promoting consensus-based public policies to develop this crucial issue. It should be noted that the CTRN has always been committed to social dialogue and has always made this clear, but one of the features of this government has, unfortunately, been its failure to engage in such dialogue.”

“The government of Carlos Alvarado Quesada is anti-union by nature. It has done nothing to initiate talks with the ANEP and the confrontation with our organisation in



Electric mobility and public transport are the two biggest challenges in terms of achieving energy system transformation and a just transition.

particular has been constant. One of the reasons is that Alvarado serves the interests of big business in the country and follows a strictly neoliberal approach to economic policy,” says Albino Vargas, general secretary of national public and private employees’ union ANEP.

Equal Times sought an official statement from the Ministry of Environment and Energy (Minae), but two weeks after making enquiries through official channels, no response had been received.

True, the pandemic has not facilitated progress with the decarbonisation plan, but the inaction or sluggishness seen in its early stages contrasts sharply with the accolades the country is now receiving for the policies of previous governments. The plan, for example, envisaged that there would be a 100 per cent electric bus service in the Greater Metropolitan Area by 2022, but only three electric buses had been received by December 2020 and they were only put into service at the beginning of August 2021.

“Costa Rica has national policy instruments such as the 2015-2030 VII National Energy Plan (PNE), the 2018-2030 National Electric Transport Plan, the 2018-2050 Decarbonisation Plan, the international commitment to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Climate Agreement, but its implementation culture is not so strong. The issue is not on the agenda of public sector trade unions, for example,” adds FES coordinator Marco Vinicio Zamora.

Can a country as small as Costa Rica really influence and bring about change in much larger and richer countries? For specialist Lawrence Pratt: “As an example, Costa Rica is important. Electricity from renewable sources is just one interesting aspect, along with 35 per cent of its land being protected, its reputation for ecotourism, the moratorium on mining and oil exploration (. . .) But there are many contributing factors. The country has repeatedly decided that it should not develop extractive activities because it is small, or that it is not suitable for heavy industry because it has neither the cheap energy nor the infrastructure required, for example. Having understood this, an industrial sector based on services, technology and light goods led to the development of sectors such as tourism, medical devices and other high-value, low-energy products. It’s an ensemble of factors: partly historical, partly good luck and partly good management.”

Pratt lists the strengths of the Costa Rican economy: its capacity to host and offer tourism and ecotourism services; its domestic production of high-tech medical equipment and pharmaceutical products for import; its production of foodstuffs for which there is high international demand, such as coffee, bananas and beef. And its powerful image-building as a green country.

It remains to be seen whether this triad of “historical factors, good luck and good management” will return as the pandemic wanes and the horizon clears again. The country will need it if it wants to make timely progress with its decarbonisation plan and maintain its role as an environmental model.

IT HAS THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK BUT WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO POWER GENUINE JUST TRANSITION IN THE PHILIPPINES?

BY ESTRELLA TORRES



© Nonie Reyes

In this 11 September 2021 photo, Rogelio Oliva stands besides his traditional diesel jeepney which he drives along the Baclaran-Nichols route in the Metro Manila area. He is reluctant to switch to an electric jeepney, as mandated by the government, because of the increased cost of upkeep and maintenance.

How compatible is the Philippine government's commitment to soaring economic growth with its ambitious pledge to transition to a low-carbon economy?

In 2008, the Philippines passed the landmark [Renewable Energy \(RE\) Act](#), which aimed to reduce the country's carbon emissions and harness its local energy sources. The law was designed to attract private investors through tax incentives to explore the rich natural energy sources in the Philippines, mostly hydrothermal, solar, wind, biomass and ocean energy.

However, today the Philippines remains deeply committed to coal. At the United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP26) which is currently taking place in Glasgow, Scotland,

the Philippines has committed to reduce harmful greenhouse gases [by 30 per cent by 2040](#). But this new target for its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) is a retreat from the government's original pledge to cut emissions by 70 per cent by 2030.

Coal accounts for nearly half of the Philippines' energy mix, and is forecast to [increase to 59.1 per cent by 2028](#), despite the government issuing a moratorium on new coal-fired power plants in October 2020. In addition, there are currently 28 coal-fired power plants operating throughout

the Philippines, with a further 22 approved by the Department of Energy (DoE) in line with its [Philippine Energy Plan \(PEP\) 2018-2040](#), which aims to support President Rodrigo Duterte's ambition to transform the Philippines into a "prosperous, predominantly middle-class society by 2040" by increasing the production of clean sources of local energy, decreasing the wasteful utilisation of energy, and ensuring "the balance between the provision of reliable and reasonably priced energy services, support for economic growth, and protection of the environment".

“We still have a workable chance to be on track with our commitments, but the Department of Energy must be more ambitious when it comes to renewable energy, and rally energy companies to shift away from coal”

For those advocating for the (increased) use of coal, economic development and poverty reduction in line with the Sustainable Development Goals is impossible without fossil fuels. But climate campaigners fear that the PEP is incongruous with the country's commitments under the Paris Agreement. How did the Philippines go from being an early leader in renewable energy to having a long-term power policy that takes it off what had been a promisingly green trajectory? According to [Greenpeace Philippines campaigner Khevin Yu](#): “The country's vested coal interests, erratic policy shifts, and political bottlenecks hinder the transition to a low-carbon pathway. We still have a workable chance to be on track with our commitments, but DoE must be more ambitious on RE with its energy plan for 2018-2040, and rally energy companies to shift away from coal.”

For Vicente Posada Unay Jr., secretary general of the National Union of Workers in the Power Industry (Power), an affiliate of the national trade union centre Sentro, part of the problem lies in the government's failure to engage properly with stakeholders outside of policy circles and the business community: “The [RE] law does not provide a process for social dialogue or consultation with workers and communities, so there is no just transition to the renewable energy strategy.”

For Unay, decarbonisation must engage everyone – from workers in polluting industries to consumers, from local communities to local governments – in order to prevent negative impacts on people and the environment. Without engaging workers in a meaningful way, the government's stated climate ambition cannot be attained, he says. “The science of climate change must be understood by workers, so that they can actively participate in the just transition.”

WHEN TRANSITION ISN'T JUST: THE CASE OF THE JEEPNEYS

One of the measures introduced in the attempt to achieve the country's climate ambitions while providing safer, cleaner, healthier and more fuel-efficient transport for Filipino commuters has been the phasing-out of jeepneys, a popular mode of public transportation since the American occupation in the 1900s. In 2017, the government introduced the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP), aimed at achieving an environmentally sustainable public transport sector by replacing all diesel-powered jeepneys older than 15 years with electric vehicles.

The measures were expected to impact approximately 200,000 drivers, many of whom felt that the enormous costs involved made the modernisation scheme “[anti-poor](#)”. According to Joshua Mata, secretary general of Philippine trade union centre Sentro, while workers are not opposed to the shift to clean energy, “affected workers, such as drivers, must be supported through subsidies and easy loans,” which is something the 2017 plan did not provide for. The National Confederation of Transport Workers' Union (NCTU), a Sentro affiliate, tried to appeal the decision but the government refused to negotiate. As a result, NCTU members launched a series of strikes and protests starting in October 2017, which crippled transport operations in major cities across the country.

Following the strike action, Sentro assisted the NCTU to form transport cooperatives which negotiated soft loans worth Php 160,000 (approximately US\$3,200) per person to help jeepney drivers make the shift to electric vehicles. However, this transition has been beset with issues. Drivers and transport cooperatives complain of the lack of enabling environment (the difficulty accessing charging stations, no services centres that repair e-jeepneys, etc.) and as well as the high cost for these electric vehicles (approximately Php 800,000 to 1,200,000/

US\$15,700 to US\$23,600). Drivers also have to shoulder additional expenses such as maintenance costs and expensive battery replacements.

“Decarbonisation must engage everyone – from workers in polluting industries to consumers, from local communities to local governments. The science of climate change must be understood by workers, so that they can actively participate in the just transition”

In addition, after more than 18 months of lockdowns in the Philippines [editor's note: the Philippines implemented one of the world's strictest stay-at-home orders in a bid to halt the spread of Covid-19], the families of jeepney drivers, mostly from the Metro Manila area, are among the informal workers who have been battling poverty and hunger alongside the coronavirus. Many drivers have resorted to begging in the streets for food, while some have turned their jeepney units into makeshift homes after being kicked out of their apartments due to loss of income.

Rogelio Oliva, 49, has been driving jeepneys for two decades and is refusing to shift to an e-jeepney due to increased maintenance costs. “Before the pandemic, I used to earn more than Php1,000 (approximately US\$20) daily for 10 to 12 hours of driving. Now my income is down to Php500 (approximately US\$9.80) because there are not enough passengers. If I shift to driving an e-jeepney, my earnings will be even less.”

Oliva says that colleagues who shifted to e-jeepneys now face hardships due to the additional cost of running these vehicles. They have to pay Php1,500 monthly (approximately US\$29.50) in battery charging fees and have to charge their vehicles for at least two to three hours before they can hit the road. He also notes that while Manila is increasingly prone to flooding, the engines of e-jeepneys cannot survive the city's water-logged streets. “The government must provide us with better alternatives such as maintenance subsidies if we are to make



Jeepney drivers protest the Philippine government's plans to phase-out all diesel jeepneys and replace them with electric vehicles in Manila, Philippines on 19 February 2018. The government says it wants to make public transport safer and greener, but operators and drivers have denounced the move as 'anti-poor' and a threat to workers' livelihoods.



© AFP/Ted Aljibe

The Philippines is hit by an average of 21 typhoons every year, at least five of which are destructive, and climate change is intensifying the frequency and strength of natural disasters in the country. In 2013, at least 6,400 people were killed after Super Typhoon Haiyan ripped through the coastal city of Tacloban, Philippines, on 24 December 2013.

the shift to e-jeepneys otherwise we won't be able to earn a decent income for our families," he says.

■ "THERE CAN BE NO JUST TRANSITION WITHOUT WORKER REPRESENTATION"

The climate emergency is more than a talking point in the Philippines. As one of the countries most prone to natural disasters, it is one of the places most at-risk from climate change, with impacts ranging from an increasing number of tropical cyclones, flooding and landslides to above-average rates of sea-level rise.

A country of 7,641 islands, the Philippines is hit by an average of 21 typhoons every year, at least five of which are destructive. In 2020, one of the world's most powerful tropical cyclones – Super Typhoon Goni (Rolly) – killed 32 people in the Philippines and caused an estimated US\$415 million worth of damage. Meanwhile, 2013 marked the year when Super Typhoon Haiyan, one of the deadliest typhoons on record, killed at least 6,400 people across the country.

During Super Typhoon Rolly in November last year, damage to the power supply in the island province of Catanduanes reached

more than Php 120 million (approx. US\$2.36 million). However, the National Electrification Administration (NEA), the government agency tasked with supporting the electric cooperatives that supply electricity in rural areas only provided Php 20 million (approx. US\$395,000) worth of loan assistance, forcing workers to take out more expensive commercial loans.

The Power union has been assisting workers in 24 electric cooperatives across the country to negotiate collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) for the sustainability of operations, particularly during natural disasters. The CBAs also seek to protect workers' security of tenure, in the event that the cooperative shifts to renewable energy.

Unay says that Sentro continues to engage with government officials from the environment and energy departments that sit on the National Renewable Energy Board to convince the government to stop accommo-

dating applications for new coal-power plants. In 2019, the union also initiated a pilot study on the impact of the shift to renewable energy by the Masbate Electric Cooperative (Maselco) in Masbate province. But the project has been postponed due to the pandemic.

Trade unions also continue to engage the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) in the implementation of 2016 Green Jobs Act that provides for the retooling and upskilling of workers in the manufacturing, agriculture, and services sectors. The Act also seeks to encourage companies to generate and sustain green jobs by providing businesses with tax relief and duty-free importation of capital equipment used in the promotion of green jobs.

“Trade unions are the biggest structures, and they have the political strength to move the government to act on climate justice,” says Mata of Sentro. Julius Cainglet, vice president for education, research and partnership at the Federation of Free Workers (FFW), says trade unions need to be better engaged by the government, particularly in relation to the Climate Change Commission (CCC, the sole policy-making body tasked with monitoring the implementation of measures linked to the country’s climate commitments as outlined in the Paris Agreement). Cainglet notes that while Filipino workers have played an important role in the global efforts to reach the climate targets, at the national level Filipino workers are side-lined in crucial climate meetings. “There can be no just transition if there is no worker representation in the Climate Change Commission,” says Cainglet.

Young climate activists are also calling for better representation on the CCC. Young people are invited to consultations as observers but they are not given the chance to provide inputs. “I hope

the government can seriously consider the voice of the youth on climate change and adopt our inputs for action,” says Mitzi Jonelle, campaign coordinator for Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (YACAP) and lead organiser of the Fridays for Future mass rallies of students and young people across the Philippines, inspired by the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg.

But campaigning for climate justice can be extremely dangerous in the Philippines. According to the London-based human rights group Global Witness, in 2019, the Philippines ranked as the second most dangerous place to live for land and environment defenders, with 43 killings. Jonelle herself has been ‘red-tagged’ – a practice where activists are blacklisted, targeted by the police and military, and maliciously labelled as ‘communists’ and/or ‘terrorists’ for taking a critical stance against the government – even though the work of YACAP is peaceful, such as developing modules on climate change for schools and providing climate education to farmers and women’s groups. “It’s frightening,” says Jonelle of being red-tagged, “but I am also indignant about such accusation. The fight for climate justice is no longer about the environment: our lives are also at stake.



In this 24 September 2021 photo, climate activists from Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (YACAP) join the Global Climate Strike from Manila Bay, where they called for urgent climate action and the protection of local marine resources.

CAN THE TARANAKI 2050 ROADMAP CREATE A BLUEPRINT FOR JUST TRANSITION AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN NEW ZEALAND?

BY SITARA MORGENSTER



© Steven Scott Taylor/Alamy Live News

E tū union members meet Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at the Taranaki Just Transition Summit in May 2019. The landmark Taranaki 2050 Roadmap was created in 2018 to help the Taranaki region transition away from high-carbon sectors to a prosperous green future by 2050.

“Unions have had the climate at their hearts for a long time. When members’ livelihoods are at risk, unions stand up – and members’ livelihoods are at risk with climate change.”

The name Taranaki doesn’t currently inspire instant recognition for most people outside of New Zealand. A green and fertile region perched on the edge of the North Island’s west coast, it was put on the tourism map in 2017 when the *Lonely Planet* travel guide ranked Taranaki second in its [global Top 10 Regions list](#). Aside from that, this region of 120,000 people has a strong Māori presence and is known as the ‘Texas of New Zealand’ thanks to its large oil and gas reserves. It is also a hub for dairy production and agriculture in the country.

But Taranaki has formulated an ambitious blueprint for just transition which could put it on the world map. In 2018, the New Zealand government banned any future offshore oil and gas exploration in the country, spurring the creation of the [Taranaki 2050 Roadmap](#). A landmark joint project involving government, workers, employers, Māori, local communities, civil society and other stakeholders, the roadmap is spearheaded by the region’s economic development agency Venture Taranaki with the aim of plotting what Taranaki’s low-carbon future might look like once it moves away from its high-carbon sectors, particularly oil and gas, and dairy farming.

There are still an estimated 20 oil and gas fields operating in Taranaki, directly employing an estimated 4,300 people, with thousands more jobs linked to industry supply chains. The 2018 announcement initially sparked concerns about job losses with one report estimating that unemployment in the region would increase by 4.7 per cent, but that's where the just transition strategy comes in: the move away from polluting industries won't happen overnight but strong social dialogue between all elements of the community is crucial to ensure that no worker is left behind by decarbonisation.

"Eventually, all of us will have to confront the fact that we have to act on climate change. In Taranaki, they're doing that sooner than most," says Sam Huggard, a strategic researcher at E tū (meaning 'stand tall'), New Zealand's biggest private sector union representing six industries. E tū participated in several brainstorming sessions and roadshows organised by Venture Taranaki between February and April 2019 to hear the ideas of as many people living and working in Taranaki as possible on what the region's economic future could look like over the next three decades. "Workers from these fossil fuel industries who have helped build the prosperity that New Zealand has enjoyed deserve the certainty of a pathway into decent, well-paying jobs in new industries," says Huggard.

“Eventually, all of us will have to confront the fact that we have to act on climate change. In Taranaki, they're doing that sooner than most”

There were conversations about how to diversify and greenify the economy in Taranaki for people who would otherwise have their job security and livelihoods threatened. Once everyone's initial thoughts were collected, the best ideas were streamlined into more concrete 'transition pathway action plans', which were progressively published from late 2019 to August 2020. The final Roadmap was published in July 2019. E tū sent eight member-leaders to the launch of the Taranaki 2050 Roadmap Summit in May 2019 who "have been trained in understanding the concept of just transition and will form a bridge between the roadmap process and the union members in their respective industries," Huggard explains.

Over the past two years, a number of initiatives coming from the Roadmap have begun to take shape: a NZ\$27 million (approximately US\$19 million) centre for future energy development, Ara Ake, was set up in Taranaki in 2019 to lead the research and development of clean energy technologies such as wind and wave power, geothermal development and hydrogen-based energy, as well

as to help businesses create well-paid green jobs. There are also ideas about diversifying land use to grow more crops such as quinoa, turn farmland into forestry or letting it return to native bush.

“WE CAN EITHER RESPOND TO CLIMATE CHANGE PROACTIVELY OR REACTIVELY”

In 2019, New Zealand – which has one of the highest emissions per capita in the OECD, thanks mainly to its agriculture industry – was among the first countries to commit to reducing the net emissions of all greenhouse gases (except biogenic methane) to zero by 2050 as laid out in the Paris Climate Agreement. But for now, creating a legislative framework is about as much as New Zealand has achieved in the fight against climate change at the national level. According to the international Climate Action Tracker – which observes climate action taken by governments, particularly in their efforts to limit global warming to 1.5°C – all of New Zealand's other efforts are either rated as highly insufficient or poor. Some commentators have even accused the government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of lacking “integrity, skill and will on climate”.

"There is certainly a big task ahead for New Zealand. Per capita, our emissions are incredibly high. One of the biggest challenges we face is that agricultural emissions make up just under half of our emissions, and apart from some science and innovation funding directed at the sector to look at ways of reducing emissions, we are lacking a comprehensive plan to deal with this emissions of this sector," says Huggard.

But as the Taranaki Roadmap demonstrates, there is a lot of purposeful activity taking place at the local and regional level. By implementing the Roadmap Taranaki will act as an exemplar for the rest of New Zealand. In Southland, the government has committed to a just transition for the closure of the aluminium smelter at Tiwai Point in December 2024.

The NZEI Te Riu Roa (the New Zealand Educational Institute in Māori) is another union that participated in the design of Taranaki's 2050 Roadmap. The involvement of the education unions is important because it is young people who will have to deal with the worst impacts of an ever-worsening climate emergency. As Barb Curran, a member of the NZEI national executive, [said in a recent interview](#): "Climate change is the most enduringly serious issue of our time and it's going to impact all of our teachers, support staff and the children we work with. We cannot care about those children without caring about the current and future impacts of climate change upon them. That's why supporting a just transition in Taranaki and elsewhere is so important."

“One of the biggest challenges we face is that agricultural emissions make up just under half of our emissions”

NZEI's president, Liam Rutherford, agrees: "Unions have had the climate at their hearts for a long time. When members' livelihoods are at risk, unions stand up – and members' livelihoods are at risk with climate change. There are two choices: we can respond actively or reactively. At the moment, we can still do both. The passion is there, school principals love the idea, but many of them don't know how [to take action] yet. Schools in many regions also have needs that are much more pressing, especially in lower socio-economic areas."

NZEI Te Riu Roa has employed a dedicated community organiser to work on climate change issues with its members, Conor Twyford. She invites *Equal Times* to attend not a *hui* but a *zhui*. *Hui* is the traditional Māori word for people coming together to *kōrero*— to have a good talk. A *zhui* is...a *hui* on Zoom. It takes place on a not-so-regular Tuesday night, with New Zealand once again in lockdown at the highest level of restrictions due to a new Covid-19 outbreak. Most of the participants have already spent much of their day online working or teaching from home, often in a house full of family, while trying to maintain a sense of normality in a world unhinged. Some of the participants have spent physical time at school.

My computer screen starts to sparkle, with still images coming to life. A total of nearly 150 people are beaming in from all over the country. It's a testament to their passion that they show up in trying times, to talk about climate change in practical ways, and to inspire and learn from each other. For example, some schools are involved with local community gardens using the *maramataka*, the traditional Māori lunar calendar, while schools in Waitara, a small



© Venture Taranaki

Image taken during a Taranaki 2050 Roadmap community consultation in March 2019. Participants share their ideas.

Taranaki town with high levels of deprivation, have been helping young people and their families look after the health of streams and promote the revival of wetland areas. Twyford says: “Most schools are already doing something, and we can connect people up. This is where the historically well-organised structure of the education union can be put to good use.”

MATCHING CLIMATE AMBITION WITH CLIMATE ACTION

While unions in New Zealand are rapidly coming to terms with the impact of climate policies on the lives of their members, mobilising people on the ground can be difficult. Some members feel that 2050 is too far away to think about, although those sentiments often come from older members. In the education sector specifically, although workers might not be faced with the prospect of losing their jobs as a direct result of climate change there is still a great passion for the issue. Educators have included environmental issues in their interactions with students for a while now, and they play a significant role in the wider community.

“The urgency for action is palpable and participants are eager to use their networks, skills, and educational roles for practical changes”

“We can offer more than 9-3 learning,” Rutherford says. “Schools are trusted institutions.” But he also points out that the government needs to get serious about just transition. Many big-ticket items need more funding, for example, the conversion of the heating systems in about half of New Zealand schools to renewable energy. NZ\$50 million (about US\$35 million) from a recent decarbonisation fund went to just under 20 schools, but there are hundreds more around the country still using fossil fuels and

lacking the budget to invest in alternatives. The government seems to be ignoring the extent of this problem.

Zippering back to the *zhui*: the subject of climate change clearly inspires the nearly 150 people on the call. The urgency for action is palpable and participants are eager to use their networks, skills, and educational roles for practical changes. These members are not doing it for themselves or for a profit; they are doing it to try and save *Papatūōnuku* (the land, a mighty Mother Earth), all its inhabitants and the future of their *tamariki* (children).

Back in Taranaki, the NZEI’s Taranaki climate convenor Kate Paris plans to screen *High Tide, Don’t Hide*, a 2021 documentary about the youth-led climate protests that have brought hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders onto the streets in recent years. It follows some of the movement’s young organisers on a steep learning curve, as they step up and take the reins of activism on behalf of their generation.

The screening will create an opportunity for people in the area to meet informally, share ideas and experiences, and to help make an action plan. “I often think the best thing to do is take students out into nature and get them to connect. Get them to identify birds, for instance,” says Paris. “The simple stuff. The stuff that doesn’t cost money. After all, they are the *kaitiaki* (guardians of the environment) of the future. If they feel a connection to nature, they will protect it.”

GETTING SERBIA'S MUCH-NEEDED ENERGY TRANSITION OFF THE GROUND IS NO EASY TASK

LOUIS SEILLER



© Louis Seiller

The mining basin of Kolubara employs 18,000 workers.

“Just a few years ago, the region’s trade unions were not interested in climate change or just transition. They were interested in wages, social dialogue, pension reforms, tax reforms, etc. But over the last four years or so, people have begun to understand why a just transition is so important. Climate change and pollution affect all of us and we are all suffering the consequences of past choices and decisions.”

Some saw it as an important first step towards energy transition. But for Serbia’s coal miners and their families, the letter sent last spring by Mining and Energy Minister Zorana Mihajlović came as a cold shower. In the letter, Mihajlović told the management of

state-owned power utility Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS, the ‘Electrical Industry of Serbia’) to suspend all activities on the construction of the 350 MW Kolubara B coal power plant, a 40-year-old project that has already been abandoned and revived several times. A month earlier, in April, the Serbian parliament adopted an unprecedented law on the use of renewable energy sources, paving the way for the decarbonisation of its energy sector. The law provides for an increase in the share of renewables in Serbia’s energy production, which is currently dominated by coal at 70 per cent compared to just under 30 per cent for hydroelectricity.

The Minister's directive was immediately met with protests by the workers of Kolubara, a mining complex located roughly 50 kilometres south-west of the capital of Belgrade in the Kolubara river basin. Miodrag Ranković, president of the region's main trade union RB Kolubara, organised several thousand workers in protest at the construction site. "We are not against a gradual energy transition, but we cannot close our power plants overnight," says Ranković, the son and grandson of miners who himself began working in coal in 1981. "Most of the people in our region depend on coal mining. Solar and wind power do not create many jobs. If we close the power plants, what will happen to the workers? Jobs will be lost and wages will be cut."

“The country's on-going transition from socialism to a market economy has created deep resentment among Serbian workers. For them, the word 'transition' is often synonymous with privatisation, impoverishment and the loss of social rights”

In Serbia, the name 'Kolubara' is synonymous with electricity. Since the days of Yugoslav planning in the early 1950s, the river basin has been the heart of the country's energy production. The region's huge lignite reserves account for 75 per cent of Serbia's coal production and the various power plants in the complex provide more than half of the electricity generated in the country of seven million, the largest in the Western Balkans. While the overall workforce declined as a result of privatisation and restructuring in the 2000s, with almost 30,000 employees, EPS remains one of Serbia's largest employers and has long defined the country's energy strategy. In Kolubara, 18,000 employees work for EPS and its subcontractors, 16,000 of which are members of the trade union headed by Ranković.

■ HIGH ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY ON COAL

"Having reserves this large is a gift from nature and an enormous source of wealth for a small country like ours. It ensures our energy independence," explains Ranković, who spoke with *Equal Times* from his office just behind the church square in Lazarevac. "But today we are under enormous pressure from the big countries of the European Union [Serbia has been an official candidate for EU membership since 2012] who are trying to use green energy to make us dependent on them. We have endured much over recent years – inflation, lack of basic necessities, bombings [by NATO in 1999] – but we have always been able to rely on our own food and above all our own energy, which has allowed us to sur-

vive." This notion of independence has deep roots in Serbia, which was deeply marked by its isolation on the international scene 20 years ago, and patriotic rhetoric resonates with a large portion of the population.

The acrid smell of coal and a landscape devastated by open-cast mines are the daily reality for the inhabitants of Lazarevac, the largest town in the Kolubara basin. The mines have continued to expand along the river, swallowing homes and fields in their wake, while the smokestacks of the power plants belch out grey smoke only a few metres away from houses and farms. But few people here take offence at their impact on health or call for improvements to their environment.

Despite the mediocre quality and high sulphur content that make it so polluting, brown coal has been an economic boon for the region. Continuously expanding mining operations have attracted workers from throughout the country and remain a pillar of the national economy.

In 2019, Serbia produced 39 million tonnes of lignite, making it one of the world's top 15 producers. While a quarter of the population struggles with poverty, the quality of infrastructure and local services in the Kolubara region are a testament to higher living standards made possible by the exploitation of lignite. According to the local trade union, workers in Kolubara earn an average salary of €800, a considerable sum compared to the country as a whole, where the average salary is €460 and unemployment affects almost 15 per cent of the working population.

The images of miners protesting in May resonated throughout the country. For trade unionists, they brought back memories of historic struggles. The 2000 Kolubara miners' strike played a key role in the revolution that led to the overthrow of the war-mongering regime of ultra-nationalist President Slobodan Milosevic, who was later transferred to the Hague Tribunal and ultimately died in prison. "It always gives me goose

bumps when the miners of Kolubara go on strike,” says Dragana Petković-Gajić, who has been involved with the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS), the country’s main trade union confederation, for 30 years. “They very rarely strike and when they do, it has a very strong symbolic and emotional component, because they do a very hard job. When they protest it means they have good cause to be worried.”

According to various estimates, Serbia’s subsoil contains more than four billion tonnes of lignite. With such seemingly inexhaustible reserves ensuring affordable electricity for consumers, even if heavily subsidised by the state, few people in Serbia are concerned about the urgency of climate change or imagine a future without coal. Advocates of lignite warn that energy prices will soar if coal is phased out, pointing to the current surge in gas prices and the instability of wind generation. But an increasing number of alarming studies on its health impact, coupled with the intensifying effects of climate change, have pushed many to adapt their discourse, notably the trade unions.

■ AWARENESS OF THE NEED FOR TRANSITION

In 2014, Serbia, along with the rest of the Balkans, was hit by unprecedented flooding, which led to the deaths of 33 people and material damage estimated at more than €1.5 billion. The rising waters of the Kolubara River brought coal production to a halt for over a week. “Just a few years ago, the region’s trade unions were not interested in climate change or just transition,” acknowledges Enisa Salimović, South-East Europe coordinator for the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). “They were interested in wages, social dialogue, pension reforms, tax reforms, etc. But over the last four years or so, people have begun to understand why a just transition is so important. Climate change and pollution affect all of us and we are all suffering the consequences of past choices and decisions.”



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As Serbian coal-fired plants are outdated, they are not able to follow the EU’ environmental requirements.

According to a [report](#) by the Europe Beyond Coal campaign, under the responsibility of the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), emissions from Western Balkan coal power plants were responsible for around 3,900 premature deaths in Europe, as well as 8,500 cases of bronchitis in children and a number of other chronic diseases. Serbia holds the sad record for most pollution-related deaths Europe at [175 per 100,000 people](#). As a result, the dramatic impact of coal on human health, above all on workers and their families, has become part of the trade union agenda in the Western Balkan countries, all of which are candidates or potential candidates for EU membership. The power plants built during the Yugoslav era are often dilapidated and are among the most polluting on the European continent. According to a [study](#) published in late 2019 by NGO Bankwatch CEE, 16 coal power plants in the Western Balkans emit as much sulphur dioxide as 250 plants in the EU. Four of the top 10 most polluting plants are located in Serbia, though their deadly clouds do not stop at the border and this pollution also affects EU citizens.

“In 2015, we signed the Paris Agreement and then...nothing. The authorities give the occasional speech about the need for change, but nothing happens. They are now being forced to act because other countries are acting, but it's already very late. If we wait any longer, this transition will not be just

lion. These figures have not been met with complete indifference by the government of the right-wing and authoritarian Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić. Serbia has, for example, signed the 2020 Sofia Declaration on the [Green Agenda for the Western Balkans](#), which affirms commitment to climate neutrality by 2050. However, some stakeholders complain of doublespeak on the part of the Serbian government and a lack of transparency in decision-making. The government's draft spatial plan for 2021-2035 envisages the construction of six new coal-fired power stations.

“We've known about the need for transition since 2006, but no one has done anything,” says Vojvodić. “In 2015, we signed the Paris Agreement and then...nothing. The authorities give the occasional speech about the need for change, but nothing happens. They are now being forced to act because other countries are acting, but it's already very late. If we wait any longer, this transition will not be just.” This summer, while touting the launch of low-carbon solar and hydroelectric projects, the Serbian president [reiterated his support for the coal industry](#) as a guarantee of independence and national security.

Although Serbia has made commitments to drastically reduce its emissions as both a candidate for EU membership as well as a signatory to the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit global warming and a member of the European Energy Community, established in 2006, the country emitted [333,602 tonnes of sulphur dioxide](#) in 2020, as much as all EU member states combined. “According to the obligations of the European Energy Community, Serbia was supposed to apply the [new standards](#) as of 1 January 2018, but it continues to emit six times more CO₂ than those standards allow,” says Hristina Vojvodić of the Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute ([RERI](#)). “Unfortunately, there is no plan for reducing these emissions. We have repeatedly referred to the inspectorate, but they told us they couldn't do anything. The Energy Community has launched [a case](#) against Serbia for non-compliance with its commitments.”

Serbia's refusal to comply with its commitments comes at a cost to both health and the economy. [According to Bankwatch](#), pollution due to coal emissions caused a total of 600,000 working days lost and resulted in economic losses approaching €5 bil-

■ PRESSURE FROM CIVIL SOCIETY

To the extent that Serbian leaders are now being forced to take a position on energy issues, it is thanks to increasing pressure from civil society. Over the last few months, the country has seen [major demonstrations](#) calling for a change in environmental policy. Inhabitants of Belgrade are increasingly frustrated by the toxic fumes from the Nikola Tesla power plants that plunge the capital into a [suffocating smog](#) every winter and make their city of two million one of the top ten most polluted capitals in the world. These demonstrations have placed environmental issues at the centre of the political debate and given rise to an unprecedented coalition of political actors developing their own strategies for a green transition that

take workers into account. Predrag Momčilović is a specialist in energy issues with the citizen movement Ne Davimo Beograd.

“At the request of some trade unions, I recently gave three presentations on the role of unions in just transition. The resolutions they adopted included ‘There is no work on a dead planet.’ It’s all still going a bit too slow for my liking but they are starting to think about these issues.”

“We have to take things one step at a time because just transition is a very contentious subject”

Trade unions are paying attention to these new citizen demands, even if they worry about the disastrous social consequences of a hasty transition. The country’s on-going transition from socialism to a market economy has created deep resentment among Serbian workers. For them, the word ‘transition’ is often synonymous with privatisation, impoverishment and the loss of social rights. “When people plug in their phones, they don’t care where

the electricity comes from, it doesn’t make any difference to them. But there are people behind those sockets,” says Salimović of the ITUC.

“We’ve already experienced several transitions. After the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia, we left behind a planned economy and in the minds of many people, it is the state that must respond to employment problems. People still expect a lot from the state and this is surely the most difficult transition of all: changing people’s mentalities,” she says.

In order to start changing these mentalities, trade unions have begun to place the concept of ‘just transition’ at the heart of their agendas. Their focus is first and foremost on education and raising awareness. They have begun holding seminars and roundtables on the subject, an essential step in a country where, for lack of real political will to counter it, the scientific evidence of



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Miodrag Rankovic, president of Kolubara’s main trade union, RB Kolubara.

climate change is still contested and conspiracy theories are widespread. “We have to take things one step at a time because just transition is a very contentious subject,” says Dragana Petković-Gajić of CATUS. “But as a trade union, we have always had to deal with complicated topics, including social dialogue and informal work. Now we have to deal with just transition, but we need time to prepare. It’s a question that is more relevant in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Each country and each trade union has its own problems. The Western countries have to understand that we need a balanced approach to just transition.”

These concerns are justified. According to several stakeholders, despite the Serbian government’s commitments to a decarbonised economy by 2050, it still lacks a social strategy for an exit from coal. Trade unions fear for the future of the mining regions, which remain entirely dependent on the extraction of lignite. The vocational schools in the Kolubara region, for example, continue to train new generations of miners without adapting their curricula to the new climate and energy challenges. “We can learn from former coal mining regions in Europe that are implementing this just transition,” says Momčilović of Ne Davimo Beograd. “To do so, we need the state to make significant investments in other renewable industries in order to create opportunities for retraining coal workers. But ensuring that green jobs offer decent wages and good working conditions is just as important. More and more coal workers are already working on temporary contracts and without the right to unionise.”

■ FINANCING THE TRANSITION: THE TRUE CHALLENGE

When it comes to things like industrial conversion, training, support measures and early retirement, everyone agrees: the energy transition will come at a considerable cost and require significant investment that Serbia is incapable of making without the help of external partners. “The energy sector desperately needs money to make this just transition,” says Petković-Gajić of CATUS. “European countries must help Serbia. The workers believe that Serbia will be left high and dry, as was the case with the previous transition and privatisations. They are convinced that they will be left without money.”

Financing the energy transition will also depend on the evolution of Serbian leaders’ geopolitical positioning. Some of their recent economic choices have given rise to fears that they will abandon some of their international commitments. “On the one hand, we are repeatedly told that we will one day be a member of the EU,” says Vojvodić of RERI. “On the other hand, decisions are being made that are opposed to European commitments. Serbian leaders are saying one thing to Serbian society and another thing to foreign stakeholders. But this is not sustainable in the long term.”

China, which has a significant presence in Serbia, has multiplied its investments in the country in recent years, notably financing polluting industrial activities that do not respect EU environmental standards such as the Kostulac B3 coal-fired power plant. It remains to be seen what impact Chinese President Xi Jinping’s recent commitment to stop building new coal-fired power plants abroad will have in Serbia. As for European financiers, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development’s (EBRD) support for wind power projects and its move away from coal represent an initial concrete step towards energy diversification.

While Serbia’s energy transition is still in its infancy due to a lack of clear political commitment, the impact it has on thousands of coal workers will depend on essential financial support from abroad, as well as the ability of trade unions and civil society to take matters into their own hands and influence political decision-makers.

IN THE ABSENCE OF FEDERAL LEGISLATION, US LABOUR UNIONS ARE LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR A POST-FOSSIL FUEL ECONOMY

BY INDIGO OLIVIER



© Sean Sprague/Alamy

In this 22 October 2021 photograph, supporters and demonstrators stand behind the five climate activists on hunger strike at the White House. The activists, who are part of the Sunshine Movement, are demanding that US president Joe Biden takes meaningful action on climate change in the face of threats to water down his US\$3.5 trillion social and environmental spending agenda.

“Every time there’s a big change, American workers get the short end of the stick, whether it’s deregulation, outsourcing, or free trade.” What is being done to ensure that the decarbonisation process is different?

When Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced the Green New Deal (GND) to Congress in 2019, many within organised labour responded with deep scepticism. The GND was presented as a non-binding resolution that acknowledged the duty of the United States government to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 while creating millions of high-wage jobs through “a fair

and just transition for all communities and workers.”

The former president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which represents over 12 million workers across 57 labour unions, told reporters at the time that trade unions had not been consulted before the legislation was released.

The term ‘just transition’ – mentioned only once in the 14-page resolution – is a framework originating in the [US labour movement](#). It is a commitment to centre the workers and communities most impacted by the transition from an extractive economy to one that is carbon neutral. But as written in the 2019 resolution, the unions most affected by this transition believed too many questions were left unanswered.

Brad Markell, executive director of the AFL-CIO’s industrial union council and chair of its energy taskforce, says this apprehension is based on the experiences of the American working class over the past 40 years. “Every time there’s a big change, workers get the short end of the stick, whether it’s [deregulation](#), outsourcing, or [free trade](#),” says Markell.

Markell has a background in manufacturing. In 1993 he was laid off from his factory job at a General Motors plant in [Detroit, Michigan](#) before being transferred to another plant an hour away in Toledo, Ohio. “I was one of the lucky ones,” he tells *Equal Times*. “People don’t often have the experience that when the highly paid job they’re in closes down, that there’s something else for them. In the absence of the creation of good family-supporting jobs in those communities, they’re going to hang on for dear life [to whatever work they can get].”

“People don’t often have the experience that when the highly paid job they’re in closes down, that there’s something else for them. In the absence of the creation of good family-supporting jobs in those communities, they’re going to hang on for dear life

Getting past workers’ scepticism with terms like ‘just transition’ he says, will require investments in their communities that create good jobs. A [2021 report](#) by the Energy Futures Initiative counts 345,000 workers in the solar industry in the United States and 114,000 in the wind industry, compared to the 1.6 million in oil, coal, and natural gas. These include solar panel installers, wind turbine technicians, engineers, electricians and more. “A big part of the problem is that most of the renewable sector is anti-union, and they’re providing low-quality jobs,” says Markell. “That’s what is so amazing about what is shaping up for offshore wind in the United States.”

ØRSTED AND REIMAGINE APPALACHIA – A LANDMARK AGREEMENT AND A BLUEPRINT

In late 2020, the North America’s Building Trades Unions (NABTU), which represents over three million workers across North America, signed a [landmark agreement](#) between the world’s largest offshore wind developer, a Danish energy company named Ørsted, to transition construction workers to the offshore wind industry. The agreement commits the company to train workers for future work at sea and use union labour for various projects planned along the US East Coast.

This agreement was a collaborative international effort that was facilitated by the Just Transition Centre (JTC) – a group within the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). In 2019, AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler, then secretary treasurer, went to Denmark and Norway to meet with Ørsted management. Markell credits Shuler for bringing the AFL-CIO and NABTU to the table.

In Denmark, local union advocacy laid the foundation for the agreement between NABTU and Ørsted by first getting the company to sign onto a global just transition pledge, explains JTC director Samantha Smith, and then through constant pressure from the Danish unions. Around the time Smith started her job at the JTC in 2016, she had a frank conversation with the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LiUNA) – a 500,000-member union with a heavy presence in the construction and energy sectors. LiUNA has been a particularly harsh critic of the Green New Deal, but when Smith spoke with them about a just transition they said: “We’ll build anything, but these big renewable energy companies have terrible labour standards.”

In 2017, the AFL-CIO passed a [resolution](#) committing it to “fight politically and legislatively” for workers affected by the transition to clean energy. The statement reads: “...



Block Island Wind Farm in Rhode Island, owned and operated by the Danish energy company Ørsted, is the first offshore wind farm in the United States.

the fastest and most equitable way to address climate change is for labour to be at the center of creating solutions that reduce emissions.” In the absence of federal legislation, a number of state and local AFL-CIO chapters have been busy laying the groundwork for the transition by putting together policies and talking to their membership.

Reimagine Appalachia is a broad coalition of environmental groups and labour organisations across four states in the heart of US coal country: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia. In late May, the AFL-CIO presidents of each state chapter released a [series of white papers](#) laying out its vision for a “federal Appalachian infrastructure plan”. The coalition held [months](#) of meetings and listening sessions to discuss with members and labour leaders what a union-centred policy framework might look like before releasing its blueprint earlier this year. Their vision is rooted in rebuilding the working class in the region through federal investment and the creation of union jobs to build a green economy.

“Transforming Appalachia into a 21st-century sustainable economy – one that is good for workers, communities, and our health – will require significant federal resources,” their blueprint reads. “We can and should accept nothing less given the immense wealth extracted from Appalachia over the past centuries.”

The coalition operates on an understanding that federal climate legislation is imminent, and that labour must be ready once it’s passed. The blueprint proposes the creation of opportunities for

workers in extractive industries, publicly funded projects with high labour standards, a modernised electric grid, clean manufacturing, sustainable transportation, and a [modern version of the Civilian Conservation Corps](#) – a New Deal jobs programme that put three million unemployed people to work planting trees and building parks during the Great Depression.

UNION ORGANISING ON CLIMATE AND AWAITING FEDERAL LEGISLATION

Other unions across the country are also spearheading a raft of ambitious climate projects.

In New York State, a coalition of labour unions representing 2.6 million workers across construction, transportation, energy, utilities, and more have formed [Climate Jobs New York \(CJNY\)](#). The group has thrown its support behind state legislation that puts New York on a path to reach 100 per cent renewable energy by 2040 and requires Project Labor Agreements (collective bargaining agreements between building

trade unions and contractors) for all offshore wind development. Through alliances with local environmental groups, CJNY has also pushed for larger investments in renewable energy infrastructure. With [five offshore wind projects](#) currently under development, New York now has the nation's largest wind pipeline, which is expected to meet almost half of New York City's energy needs by 2035.

“Transforming Appalachia into a 21st-century sustainable economy – one that is good for workers, communities, and our health – will require significant federal resources. We can and should accept nothing less given the immense wealth extracted from Appalachia over the past centuries”

In the largest oil-producing state in the US, the Texas AFL-CIO voted in favour of a resolution backing the [Texas Climate Jobs Project](#) this July. If implemented, the plan is expected to create over a million jobs in the next 25 years through the development of wind and solar energy, while tackling the “intersecting crises” of the pandemic, income inequality, racial injustice and the climate emergency.

Weeks after the 2020 election, a coalition called Climate Jobs Rhode Island (RI) was formed between labour and environmental groups across the state. Climate Jobs RI has put forward a number of goals that include “institutionalizing the concept of a Just Transition within all governmental agencies of the state,” reaching net-zero emissions by 2050, transitioning to renewable energy, and increasing apprenticeship training programs to retool workers with the skills they will need to work in a green economy.

So how does government policy tie-in with these union-led initiatives? Biden campaigned on a platform of rebuilding US manufacturing, and with it, the middle class through good union jobs that would put the US on the path to net-zero emissions by 2050. His [Build Back Better Agenda](#) includes a clean energy plan, a US\$2 trillion investment in infrastructure, the creation of 10 million jobs with good wages, benefits, and worker protections, investments into the research and development of green technology, modernised schools, and public housing.



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A coal scraper machine works on a pile of coal at American Electric Power's (AEP) Mountaineer coal power plant in New Haven, West Virginia (2009). This is one of the four states in the heart of US coal country.

But despite the Democratic Party holding all three branches of government, federal legislation on climate, labour, and infrastructure has reached a stalemate thanks, in part, to two right-wing Democratic senators: Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia. West Virginia has the second-highest poverty rates in the nation largely due to a sharp decline in jobs within the coal mining industry, where Senator Manchin grew his fortunes. With the Republican Party in opposition to Biden's agenda, these two votes within the Democratic Party will determine whether legislation will pass or not.

In August, Manchin cast down a tie-breaking vote against a reconciliation bill that would have seen US\$3.5 trillion invested in the country over ten years (less than half of what the US will spend on its military budget over the same period). As it was initially proposed, the legislation would have been the largest climate investment in the country's history, but through several back-and-forth compromises within the Democratic Party, many of the initial elements have been stripped away. According to a recent investigation by *The Intercept*, Manchin has made US\$4.5 million from his coal companies, despite claims that they have been held in a blind trust since he took office.

Markell over at the AFL-CIO, who served on the Biden-Harris transition team within the Department of Energy, is positive about the Biden administration's commitment to just transition: "We have a president who is committed to unions and union jobs and understands what that means for families and communities. While at the same time, he is putting us on a path to meet the climate goals that science says we have to meet." However, on the question of whether his legislative agenda will be enacted, Markell adds cautiously: "We'll see if Congress wants to do its part."

Acknowledgements: This report was made possible thanks to the financial support of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and editorial support from Bert De Wel of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

Equal Times Special Report No 13

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