Unions and Just Transition in the Global South

Climate change represents an unprecedented challenge for workers and trade unions around the world. We must respond to climate impacts on our homes and workplaces and make sure that bringing down emissions creates new and good jobs rather than mass unemployment.

In the shift to a low-carbon economy, Just Transition guarantees that no one is left behind, that the new jobs are good jobs, and that every worker has rights at work, social protection, and a dignified life. It is also a way for the trade union movement – which has long struggled against the relentless attacks of corporations and governments – to forge new alliances with civil society, organise new groups of workers, and expand its power and influence.

In October 2019, a workshop in Amsterdam provided unions from all over the world the opportunity to exchange experiences, share examples and identify next steps/new strategies to promote and implement Just Transition in the Global South, especially in agriculture and energy. Organised by the Just Transition Centre and Mondiaal FNV, the event brought together leaders from regional and global unions, trade union solidarity organisations, and national union federations and their affiliates from Colombia, South Africa, Nigeria, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Brazil, Netherlands, Sweden, and Spain.

With concrete examples of the issues, successes and failures encountered in the unions’ quest for Just Transition, the participants were able to exchange best practices, raise important questions, identify opportunities for collaboration and bring back new perspectives to their own countries.

What is Just Transition?
Following the ILO Guiding Principles for a Just Transition1, the International Trade Union Confederation defines it as follows:

‘A Just Transition secures the future and livelihoods of workers and their communities in the transition to a low-carbon economy. It is based on social dialogue between workers and their unions, employers and government, and stakeholder engagement with communities and civil society. A plan for Just Transition provides and guarantees better and decent jobs, social protection, more training opportunities and greater job security for all workers affected by global warming and climate change policies.’

While climate change is widely understood around the world, the concept of Just Transition is just becoming mainstream. Though South African unions were at the forefront in developing the concept, it is a newer concept in the rest of the Global South. One of the first challenges for trade unions in many developing countries is thus to explain to workers what Just Transition is, how it can be achieved and what benefits result from it – particularly when good, organised jobs are at risk.

“Convincing coal plant unions to transition is very hard. They have really good wages and benefits.”

1. ILO Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all, click here to download
In many Latin American countries, social dialogue is non-existent or weak and negotiating a Just Transition seems far away. Accusations by government of ‘economic development obstruction’ are not uncommon in the Philippines. Meanwhile, even in South Africa, Just Transition can sometimes be seen as working against the interest of workers, especially if a green shift is taking place without a proper transition plan that supports their livelihoods.

The same happened in Spain. The closure of mines gave rise to massive unemployment and depopulation. In regions where mining is a deep-rooted tradition, the transition towards sustainable jobs was met with stiff resistance, which could be only overcome through the involvement of all social actors in the design of new strategies and policies.

For Just Transition to be successful, it must be based on labour rights, social dialogue, gender equality and social justice.

One example of an effective Just Transition happened in the Netherlands, where the port workers’ union backed a transition out of coal, even though that fossil fuel represented an important part of their workload.

The first lesson drawn from this experience was the importance of having strong unions. With a unionisation rate of 90%, the Dutch workers were able to push their demands collectively and pressure the government to properly compensate the people affected by the transition.

FNV also believes that international solidarity is critical to achieve these goals, and that the general public needs to be properly informed about and supportive of the unions’ position. Citizens have the right to know how their tax money is being spent, and they will generally support reforms that seek to green their society while protecting the most vulnerable.

Just Transition and Energy

Energy production is often portrayed as one of the main culprits behind climate change, and there is no doubt that the burning of fossil fuels (oil, gas, or coal) to produce energy is responsible for releasing large amounts of CO2 emissions into the atmosphere.

But energy is what turns the wheels of the economy, and while the need to shift away from fossil fuel towards renewables is largely accepted, a lot of work still needs to be done to protect the livelihoods of the millions of men and women who work in this industry, and industries dependent on energy.

If Just Transition is going to be successful, it must include the energy sector, and be based on several pillars such as labour rights, the right to affordable and reliable energy, the creation of low-carbon decent jobs, the protection of people and communities affected by fossil fuel extraction as well as social protection.

Participants in the Amsterdam workshop reiterated the need for workers and unions to take the lead on this vital transition, and to use all the means at their disposal – including industrial action – to force governments into action. Otherwise, businesses will drive the process in a way that mainly benefits them and their shareholders.

This is a serious concern in Nigeria but also in Colombia, where anti-trade union violence is rampant, union organising difficult and sectoral collective bargaining non-existent.

Colombian unions are pushing for international collaboration, social dialogue, and a cultural change to reduce the use of energy worldwide. They also defend the public ownership of the state-owned oil company Ecopetrol, which is currently being threatened with privatisation.

Some participants echoed this view and agreed on the need to fight privatisation and preserve public ownership of energy production, which they see as more inclined to defend workers’ interests.

SEWA (self-employed women’s association) replacing diesel engines with solar panels to help their work on the salt mines. PHOTO: VNV ADVISORY

“Working together is essential…and never giving up”.

Coal mining and processing plant worker, South Africa. PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK
In the Philippines for example, where energy production was privatised twenty years ago, unions are pushing for its renationalisation.

“We need to develop union power from below”.

In a country where the political context tends to complicate the work of trade unions and civil society organisations, workers reaffirm their opposition to corporatisation, sue carbon emitters in partnership with environmental organisations, include Just Transition in collective bargaining agreements and create national coalitions that involve trade unions, civil society organisations and academia. By joining their forces and experiences, they can promote the country’s economic development without sacrificing jobs and the environment.

In India, unions started by collecting information, which was then used to respond to the precise needs of salt farmers. A special loan system was subsequently developed, allowing access to solar-powered pumps that not only proved cheaper, but also increased productivity.

Just Transition in the energy sector is progressing slowly in Latin America as a whole. With democracy and workers’ rights under attack, trade unions are building alliances with civil society organisations and mapping out plans for Just Transition. Their guiding principles are:

“We workers are not responsible for the climate crisis”.

“It is important to talk about the historical and differentiated responsibility of the countries.”

These two concepts not only emphasise the will of workers to participate in the transformation of an economic model they did not choose, but also offer a useful reminder of the origins of the crisis.

Latin American unions working on Just Transition also stressed the importance of reproductive work and gender in these discussions. The need to include gender was also reflected by unions in other regions. The goal should be to reach an economy that guarantees low-carbon consumption, but also reflects on the models of reproduction and consumption.

Just like in the Philippines and Colombia, the public ownership of energy is a key issue for unions, as are the property rights of technology and innovation in the Americas, which are still predominantly owned by the Global North and multinational corporations.

All of this must be undertaken with a clear defence of labour and human rights.

Just Transition and agriculture

When it comes to Just Transition in agriculture in the Global South, Indonesia and Nigeria offer two powerful examples of the types of challenges that unions and workers face.

Already the world’s biggest producer of palm oil, Indonesia wants to expand production. Fuelled by the government’s ambition to increase productivity, farmers are given access to funds and land permits. Labour rights are a serious concern and therefore the main focus of trade unions. Though the government has invited trade unions for discussions about Just Transition in connection with the UN climate negotiations, Just Transition is hardly ever discussed otherwise, and it seems the government “has no idea of what a Just Transition is.”

Unions have responded by developing position papers and alliances with environmental organisations in order to raise awareness among government officials.

For Just Transition to be more successful, trade unions need to act closer together, force the authorities and private companies to acknowledge the issue and develop grassroots campaigns targeting the landowners who produce palm oil.

“Let’s build the conversation together, let’s get the responses together, and then, eventually, we will hit the rock.”

Nigeria suffers from the same lack of government understanding of or focus on Just Transition. The Nigerian Labour Congress, in partnership with Friends of the Earth Nigeria, has organised several
workshops with farmers to discuss the best ways to transition out of a farming model that largely depends on pesticides, chemicals and fertilizers. The trade union can rely on the success of the sustainable farm Songhai, which it hopes to emulate throughout the country.

As women make up the majority of the workforce in agriculture in the Global South, a key component for a successful Just Transition in this sector is the inclusion of women, who still suffer from gender discrimination when it comes to land ownership, access to loans or capacity-building.

**Conclusion and opportunities**

From the start trade unions have faced powerful and even violent opposition, and it is no different when it comes to Just Transition. In the Global South, structural barriers to Just Transition include anti-union governments and employers, outsourcing, informality, poverty, low social protection, and opposition from communities who largely depend on polluting industries for jobs and revenue.

It will take time, effort, commitment, and even industrial action, but there is no alternative.

If we are to preserve our planet, while protecting the workers of the world, Just Transition needs to be based on global strategies, union collaboration and the involvement of all sectors.

“We will need to take more action; we are learning how to do it as a movement.”

It must evolve from the workers, who need to resist the financial markets’ false solutions that promote a trickle-down approach primarily serving the interests of governments and businesses.

International solidarity between unions can multiply the pressure to reach Just Transition at a domestic level, while providing a unified framework and developing a common understanding about climate change and its effects on labour.

There is a need for trade unions to work together and to build bridges with environmental and organisations and academia to create strong proposals and campaigns for Just Transition processes.

Studies, data, and fact-based analysis on the solutions for a greener energy and agricultural production must be accompanied by strong communication campaigns and a call for global mobilisation.

As the world shifts to new energy models, it is vital to keep track of this transition and ensure that workers continue to be represented and their rights protected.

In countries where informal economy is important, trade unions also need to build bridges with non-unionised workers and with civil society organisations that share similar views about social justice.

Collaboration among supporting organisations such as trade union solidarity organisations and other non-governmental organisations including civil society organisations is also necessary, where they can help to facilitate bringing together the right parties to the table at national level to increase the chance for success. They can also play a role in increasing opportunities for the creation of better/good green jobs in the RE sector.

This workshop proved that the issues and solutions for Just Transition are similar across Asia, Africa, America and Europe, and that international solidarity and collaboration remains among the most effective tools to empower workers and their union representatives.

Together, they can build the world of tomorrow, in which the environment is preserved, workers protected, and discrimination abolished.