

# Trade unions and climate change: the jobs-versus-environment dilemma

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**Unions can be torn between mitigating climate change tomorrow and saving jobs today. A significant Just Transition Fund could ease that dilemma.**

The European Trade Union Confederation has criticised the fact that the Covid-19 recovery package, Next Generation EU, does not contain a stronger Just Transition Fund. The transition to a low-carbon economy is one of the major challenges ahead for the European Union, its member states and citizens. It also poses a particular challenge for trade unions which have to take a stance *vis-à-vis* this large-scale transition—as it will inevitably reshape the economy, create and destroy jobs and affect working conditions and skills.



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No matter how unions respond, they may be faced with criticism. If unions advocate ambitious mitigation of climate change, workers may turn away because of potential job losses. Companies may meanwhile blame unions, as policies reducing emissions could entail lower profits.



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If unions however focus on safeguarding employment—possibly to the detriment of the environment—this may spark criticism from society at large. So how do unions deal with the challenge of decarbonisation and reconcile potentially diverging interests?

## Three strategies

Most unions across the EU generally acknowledge the need to stem climate change and endorse the goal of decarbonising the economy. Their particular strategies are however marked by the dilemmas arising from concerns over job losses.

Our recent research has identified three union approaches towards emissions-reduction policies in manufacturing and power generation: *opposition*, *hedging* and *support*. These are best conceived as ‘ideal types’—not necessarily expressed in a pure form in reality but points on a spectrum.

Strategies *opposing* climate-change mitigation see unions openly reject emissions-reduction policies in the industries they represent. To the best of our knowledge, the only example of such outright opposition would be the Polish coalminers' unions, seeking to preserve jobs and arguing for national energy 'sovereignty'.

*Hedging* strategies are adopted by those unions that do not deny the need to mitigate climate change but seek to minimise (rather than oppose) regulation, advocate incremental approaches and construct a dichotomy between the competing priorities of employment and environmental protection. An example is the position of the steelworkers' unions affiliated to the European trade union federation IndustriAll Europe, over the latest reform of the EU emissions-trading system.

A similar response could be observed among unions representing car workers, dealing with new EU-wide CO<sub>2</sub> emission standards for cars and vans. Car workers' unions upheld employment concerns, arguing for incremental approaches. Hedging strategies seem to be the most widespread ones to date.

*Support* strategies are adopted by unions with a proactive approach to decarbonisation. An example is the Statement on a Just Energy Transition signed in 2017 by the union participants in the European social dialogue in the energy sector (Eurelectric, European Federation of Public Service Unions and IndustriAll Europe). Although not legally binding, the statement includes recommendations on company policies and calls for additional public investment in a just transition.

## **Relatively new topic**

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The diversity in strategies reflects the challenge unions face. As climate-change mitigation is a relatively new topic on which unions are just about to build up expertise, their strategies are not necessarily based on an exhaustive analysis of circumstances and evaluation of all options, but are likely to be influenced by short-term perceptions and established modes of organisational priority-setting.

Unions should however adopt a long-term perspective. The transition towards a low-carbon-economy will inevitably happen and how unions position themselves may offer opportunities as well as threats.

There is the opportunity for unions to present themselves as responsible actors proactively shaping the just transition. Such a response could raise public awareness of the broader role of unions in society and help recruit new members, including in the emerging and expanding green economy.

## **Just Transition Fund**

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There is however a risk that established groups of members adversely affected by decarbonisation could turn away from unions. This danger explains the importance that European trade unions assign to the Just Transition Fund within the EU recovery plan.

A strong political commitment by European leaders and lawmakers to a substantial fund would represent a resource for those within the union movement willing to address the challenges of climate change. Resolute public support for mitigating the possible adverse employment consequences of decarbonisation would make it easier for unions to strike a balance between employment and climate concerns.

### About Adrien Thomas and Nadja Dörflinger

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Adrien Thomas is a research scientist at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER), focused on employment relations and the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Nadja Dörflinger is a senior social scientist in the 'Changing World of Work' research group at the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA), Germany, interested in employment relations, labour markets and trade unions in a comparative European perspective.

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