

Germany Case Report German Labour Unions and the Just Transition: State-driven eco-modernisation as strategy for union renewal.

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Preamble

This report was written in 2023–2024, while a coalition government formed by **Social Democrats (SPD)**, **Greens and Liberals (FDP)** was still **in office**. Our findings and analysis reflect the policy debates and institutional settings of that period.

Since the collapse of that government in late 2024, Germany’s political landscape, and with it the conditions under which the policy debates described herein are taking place, has shifted markedly, requiring that our results be read in the light of these developments.

The 2025 snap election brought the conservative CDU back into power – with SPD as a junior coalition partner – and saw the far-right AfD double its share of the vote to become the second-strongest force in Parliament. This outcome has changed the climate policy debate in important ways: the former relative priority accorded to climate issues has given way to renewed rhetorical emphasis on fiscal consolidation, national competitiveness and defense, and a series of political moves away from previous commitments. While the *Schuldenbremse* (‘debt brake’) has been amended to allow the allocation of special funds (“*Sondervermögen*”) for military and infrastructure investment, the government is pursuing the construction of dozens of new gas-fired power stations without a commitment to ‘hydrogen readiness’, starting discussions about slowing or weakening renewable energy and heating targets, effectively scrapping the recently introduced supply chain law, and pushing for a repeal of the EU’s combustion engine ban. That is, while Germany’s headline climate commitments – net zero by 2045, coal phase-out, EU-mandated emissions cuts – remain in place, the instruments and pace of implementation are under review.

For trade unions, this altered context poses both risks and opportunities. The strengthening of conservative and far-right forces has made climate politics more contested and polarised, also raising the stakes for defending social justice in the transition. At the same time, the expansion of infrastructure and transformation funds has the potential to open new avenues for union engagement in shaping job creation, skills development, and just transition frameworks in emerging sectors.

Despite these changes, the core findings of this report remain highly relevant. The central climate legislation is still intact, and unions’ positions have not shifted significantly. They continue to insist that social dimensions – fair burden sharing, worker protection, and broad societal legitimacy – must remain at the forefront of climate politics if the transformation is to succeed. Their vision of a transition to net zero continues to align with what we define as state-driven eco-modernisation, resting on two pillars: (i) a more active role for the state through strategic investment, financing, and protection of national industry from green dumping, and (ii) a strong emphasis on technological solutions to address the climate crisis without fundamentally challenging established labour relations or the relationship between society and nature.





1. Introduction and executive summary

Germany is the **largest emitter of total territorial greenhouse gases (GHG)** in Europe (European Parliament, 2018) and among the countries in Europe with highest per capita emissions (Eurostat, 2025b).

Known for its automobile industry, but also as one of the world’s largest exporters of other mechanical, electrical and pharmaceutical products, Germany still remains a major industrial economy. Manufacturing contributes 20 per cent of GDP (Eurostat, 2025a) and 23 per cent of workers continue to be employed in the secondary, industrial sector, which includes material processing, manufacturing and construction (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025). This continuing industrial specialization makes it a major task for Germany to decarbonise its economy and has recently rendered its governments’ earlier aspirations to assume a frontrunner position in climate mitigation hard to maintain.

The current structure of Germany’s economy will require significant changes in the coming years and decades in order to reach net zero emissions and meet national and European climate targets. Politicians as well as trade unionists generally accept that these changes are going to have profound effects on work and the situation of workers within the country. In light of these characteristics and objectives, this report investigates Germany’s climate policy, the country’s organized labour movement and how these two interact, with a particular emphasis on how German unions conceive and put into action a ‘just transition’ to a decarbonised economy.

Just transition is a concept that is routinely debated by the International (ITUC) and European Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), emphasising the need to “secure the futures and livelihoods of workers and their communities in the transition to a low carbon economy” and to “provide and guarantee better and decent jobs, social protection, more training opportunities and greater job security for all workers affected by global warming and climate change policies” (ITUC, 2024). In the following pages we aim to shed light on whether and how German labour unions engage with this concept and develop strategies to achieve these goals.

It is important to point out that data collection and analysis for this report took place in 2023 and

2024, when the Social Democratic-Green-Liberal coalition government formed after the 2021 federal election was still in power. The dissolution of the coalition government in November 2024 and the parliamentary elections of 23 February 2025 have brought significant change in the basic parameters of the situation and the processes described here, which cannot be considered in detail. With the exit of the Greens and the constructive coalition talks between the CDU/CSU and SPD, the priority given to climate policy and redistributive tax policy is most likely going to decrease. We will evaluate the evolving political situation in relation to the findings of the report in the discussion section.

1.1 Germany’s Climate Policy

In the Climate Change Act (CCA) (Bundes-Klimaschutzgesetz) passed in 2019, Germany has set out a pathway to reach its national goal of carbon neutrality by 2045. The CCA is a comprehensive law that includes targets, timelines, programmes to meet targets, sanctions for missing targets, institutional bodies to monitor and evaluate progress, and the involvement of various societal stakeholders.

In line with the CCA, the latest climate action programme (Klimaschutzplan) by the now-dissolved federal government includes a wide-ranging list of cross-sectoral and sector-specific measures to reach emission reduction targets. One of the key points included in its cross-sectoral measures is a specific focus on the design and implementation of a socially just transformation. It includes monitoring of distributional effects of climate policy measures, a focus on equitable living conditions, and more financial support to regions and municipalities that are most strongly structurally affected or financially weak. Of the seven sectors specified as fields of climate political intervention – energy, industry, transport, building, agriculture, waste and others – the transport and building sectors have repeatedly missed their national targets. Although sometimes hailed “the most progressive government globally” (see for instance Adam Tooze

at Jung & Naiv, 2023), the now dissolved ‘traffic light’ coalition government, consisting of Greens, Social Democrats (SPD) and Liberal Democrats (FDP), created more headlines with its internal divisions over climate policies than successful implementation of measures.

The Council of Experts on Climate Change (Expertenrat für Klimafragen) – an independent body put in place under the CCA to evaluate and enact statutory instruments – has repeatedly criticised the government for missing sectoral targets as well as for the programme’s general (lack of) ambitions to meet the stipulated climate targets. In response to this, and to ongoing political resistance to meaningful action in the transport sector in particular (so far blocking even simple measures such as a speed limit on highways), the federal government has opted to abandon the sectoral targets altogether, in favour of general targets to be achieved by all sectors in concert – a move widely taken to signal a further weakening of political will for decisive action (Expertenrat für Klimafragen, 2023a).

In addition to the watering down of sectoral targets – which might result in the imposition of fines by the European Union – climate policy discourse has turned towards increasing scepticism of agreed targets and measures following the recent resurgence of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the rise of social-conservative Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW). Combined with long-standing dogged insistence on strict adherence to Germany’s constitutional balanced budget rule or ‘debt brake’ by fiscal hawks both in government and opposition, and an increasing focus on spending needs for security, any sort of transformational climate policy has effectively been put on the backburner.

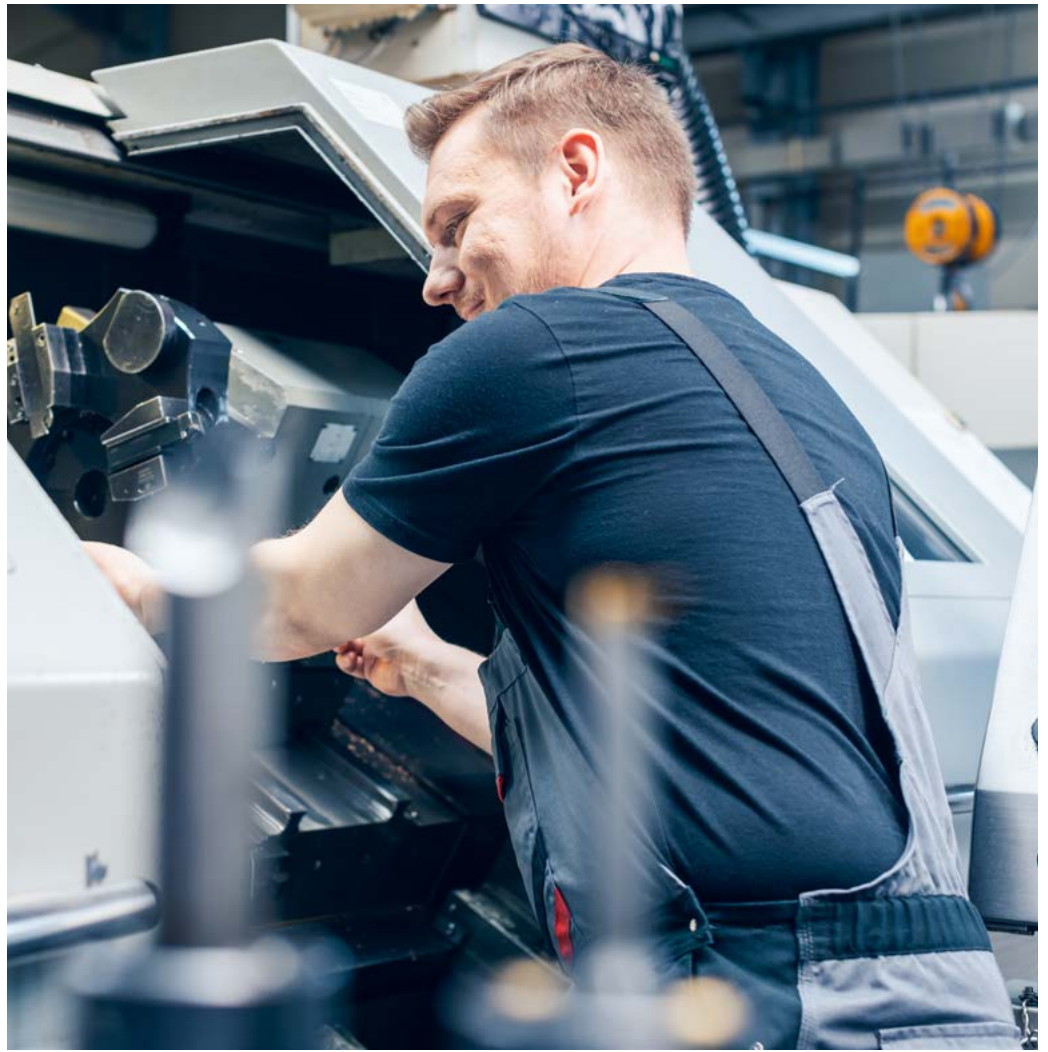
The inclusion of various societal stakeholders, in line with a corporatist tradition, is a key part to the rationale of the CCA, as well as of government climate policy more generally. In order to measure and evaluate economic, social and environmental impacts, the CCA directs the

federal government to involve federal states (Bundesländer), municipalities, civil society and business organisations in addition to the scientific advisory bodies of the government. The institutional embeddedness of different societal actors, including labour unions and especially their largest confederation, the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), takes shape in various forms and formats, ranging from the Council for Sustainable Development through the alliance for transformation (“Allianz für Transformation”) situated in the chancellery, to multi-stakeholder commissions for the phase-out of coal or the gas and energy crisis resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war. In a way, this corporatist approach to climate policy is a mirror of Germany’s general institutional set-up and its typical forms of institutional mitigation of interests in other fields, including labour, work and employment.

1.2 Germany’s labour movement and Just Transition

Considering German labour unions’ traditionally important role and influence in policymaking, this report investigates how these organizations engage with climate change and climate policy today. For instance, what importance is the topic of climate change and its consequences being assigned within different unions? What positions do they take on the climate emergency and how do these translate into political demands? Which channels of influence do unions have at their disposal to make their voices heard in climate politics, and how successful are they in using them? What types of policies and measures do they propose, and what initiatives have they developed to further implementation of a socially just decarbonization?

To provide answers to these questions, the report follows a case study approach, focusing on the sectorally organised member unions of the largest and most powerful trade union confederation in Germany: the DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund). Unions taken into account include the Industriegewerkschaft Metall (IG



Metall – metalworking, engineering, automotive), the Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft (ver. di – service sector), the Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie und Energie (IGBCE – mining, chemicals and energy), the Industriegewerkschaft Bauen, Agrar, Umwelt (IG BAU – construction, agriculture and environment), the Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft (EVG – railways and transport) , the Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW - union education and science), and the Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten (NGG – food and hospitality)¹.

We used archival and publicly available data including official position papers, congress motions and commentaries on climate policy bills and press statements, in combination with around 25 semi-structured interviews with union officials from the above-mentioned unions as well as with several works councillors. We included the latter group of

respondents to have a more detailed on-the-ground, workplace perspective in addition to the union officials' sectoral and national views.

Labour unions in Germany conceive themselves as advocates of workers on the one hand and as socio-political organisations with a more overarching societal responsibility on the other (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 1996). This dual role, together with their strong but waning influence, leads to tensions in their positionings on climate change and climate policy. In our interviews as well as in all official position papers, unions and their representatives unanimously express their support for the climate political targets set both by the Paris Agreement and the national Climate Change Act. In short, there is no discussion on whether climate change is a reality and a central societal challenge that needs to be tackled. This notwithstanding, a number of disagreements

¹ We contacted the police union (Gewerkschaft der Polizei) several times, but interviews never materialised.

remain concerning how to do it. As advocates for their members and for workers more generally, unions argue that a transition towards a net zero economy that fulfils climate targets can only be successful if it includes a strong component of social protection and safeguards for employment. Only by thinking social, employment and climate policies as complementary instead of as opposing forces, unionists argue, will there be broad public acceptance, without which any transition is bound to fail (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2020; Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax and Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund,

2021; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021, p. 55; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022a; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a).

The core aim for the industrial unions is to maintain production and manufacturing jobs in Germany, while thoroughly transforming these sectors so as to make them global forerunners in environmental sustainability, and thus the most competitive in a worldwide race toward climate neutrality. The main condition for achieving this is seen in a renunciation of what unions see as a market fundamentalism narrowly fixated on cutting costs, which, in their eyes, has dominated German and European politics for too long and crucially contributed to the current crisis. In response, unionists argue for a return to an industrial policy actively and strategically pursued by government. Unions broadly agree on four main policy tools to achieve a socially balanced transformation (Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022a; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie et al., 2022; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023e, 2023a; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, NABU and BUND, 2023):

1. Massive public investments into infrastructure, renewable energies and decarbonisation technologies,
2. Social, employment-related and environmental requirements and obligations as binding conditions for any public investment or state support to employers,
3. Governmentally supported and subsidised training and re-training initiatives and programmes to ease the current shortage of qualified workers,
4. Easing of planning and approval procedures to accelerate the expansion of renewable energy projects.



However, rather than framing the combination of these recurring policy elements clearly as a coherent Just Transition strategy, unions mostly tend to subsume them as part of a broader process called “transformation”. In German policy parlance, this notion has come to refer to a complex of ongoing socio-economic changes triggered not only by climate change, but also by digitalisation and demographic changes. Unionists, we find, are attracted to that broad framing of “transformation” out of a basic, habitualised impulse of reacting to externally imposed change not with opposition, but with an ambition to actively shape said changes in the interest of workers. This broader framing tends to trump more specific approaches to dealing with climate crisis and environmental concerns as implied by the just transition concept.

Except for two participants, all interviewees were familiar with the term ‘Just Transition’, which was also present in some congress motions (Trappmann, Eversberg and Schulz, 2025a). Yet, no one applied the term to their own unions’ strategies in internal debates or communication with members. Instead, it was frequently perceived as a purely political term – a buzz word – often used in high-level political conversations to avoid being specific. A number of interviewees stated that they viewed it as a term used commonly in European and international union debates that they considered relevant in activities coagulating around the EU’s Just Transition mechanism but that hardly played a role at the domestic level. In relation to domestic processes like the phasing out of the lignite industry in Rhineland and Lusatia, common parlance is much more about the more neutral-sounding term ‘structural change’ (Strukturwandel).

While in unionists’ rhetoric – both in documents and during our interviews – justice claims often have a global scale and broad scope, including people and workers everywhere, the actual policy focus tends to be predominantly on the national and regional level. The large variety of initiatives pursued by unions at different levels, from the proposal to establish regional councils for transformation (regionale Transformationsräte) and the push for a

new version of short-time work schemes that allows workers to re-train to remain with their current employer (Transformationskurzarbeitergeld), through support for the worker-led conversion process of an automotive supplier (Federal Mogul) or education seminars on alternatives to economic growth to a draft bill proposal for a reform of the Works Constitution Act (Betriebsverfassungsgesetz), highlights the diverse channels and strategies German labour unions make use of to shape the imminent and ongoing transformation towards net zero.

Nevertheless, on the whole there is still a convergence on what has long been the common denominator of German unions’ strategies: In terms of addressing climate change systematically, the main line of unions’ orientation is to advocate for a state-driven eco-modernisation strategy that leaves capitalist relations of production and ownership untouched, but puts the state – and to some extent workers – instead of the market in the driver’s seat (Trappmann, Eversberg and Schulz, 2025a). Disagreements tend to arise less from the proposed targets and measures. Instead, contested aspects of the transformation process relate to the speed of the necessary changes and in some instances to engagement and public statements with environmental NGOs and the climate movement.

2. Labour and climate policy in Germany



2.1 Field of climate policy

A full and detailed description and analysis of Germany's climate policy would be beyond the scope of this report. What we aim to provide in this section is an overview of Germany's climate policy framework, the most relevant laws and the main actors involved in the climate policy process. For German readers engaged in climate policy from various perspectives this section is unlikely to offer any new insights. For readers not familiar with German climate politics, we aim to highlight the main climate policy framework in sufficient detail to enable a general understanding of the national climate policy arena that German labour unions act within and in relation to which they attempt to develop their own climate policy demands.

2.1.1 Overview of the most important laws

As member of the European Union (EU), Germany is bound by the emission reductions and net zero targets set by the European Climate Law, which builds on the goals stipulated in the European Green Deal. The law sets out climate neutrality by 2050 and emissions reductions of 55 per cent compared to 1990 levels by 2030 – the progress of which needs to be monitored through national climate plans. In addition to the overall emission reduction targets and plans, member states need to develop roadmaps for how to meet sector-specific targets, especially those that are part of the effort sharing (European Commission, 2023). Sectors falling into this category are domestic transport (excluding aviation), buildings, agriculture, small industry and waste. As part of the effort sharing, Germany is obliged to reduce emissions in these sectors by 50 per cent until 2030 (ibid.).

To implement the EU law nationally, Germany passed the Climate Change Act in 2019 (Bundes-Klimaschutzgesetz (KSG), 2019). In line with EU law, the act stipulates national greenhouse gas (GHG) emission targets, targets for natural carbon sinks, sectoral emissions targets, consequences for missing targets, the content of climate action programmes, reporting and the role of an independent Council of Experts on Climate Change.

In June 2021 the act was amended, following a ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court, to shift the national net zero target forward from 2050 to 2045. The same amendment also set reductions of 65 per cent of CO₂ emissions by 2030 and 88 per cent by 2040 compared to 1990 levels as mandatory (ibid.). The act further stipulates gradual targets for CO₂ capture by national sinks through land use, land-use change and forestry.

To achieve the national GHG emission reduction targets, the act sets out permissible sectoral emission budgets and mitigation targets for the following sectors: Energy, Industry, Transport, Buildings, Agriculture, Waste and others. Developments in these sectors are monitored continuously by the Federal Environmental Agency (Umweltbundesamt) and reviewed every two years by the Council of Experts on Climate Change. The council is an independent body installed by the Climate Change Act and endowed with “authority to enact statutory instruments” (p. 8). Its five members, experts from different disciplines, are appointed for a period of five years.

If the council finds that a sector misses its annual emission reduction target, the law requires the Federal Ministry responsible to present “an immediate action programme for the relevant sector” (ibid., p. 6) within three months following the presentation of the report. The federal government has then to discuss the proposed measures, and, once they had been assessed by the council, “adopt these ... as quickly as possible” (ibid.).

In April 2024, after repeated failures of the transport and housing sectors to meet emission reduction targets, an additional amendment to the CCA was passed. Aiming to avoid measures that would impose negative effects on industries or households as a result of increased efforts to meet targets, the amendment weakened sectoral commitments in favour of overarching, cross-sectoral targets (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, 2023b). In short, an excess in emission reductions in one sector could now offset another sector's failure to meet its targets. The



Council of Experts on Climate Change criticised the amendment as well as previous immediate action programmes targeting the building and transport sector as insufficient to reach emission targets (Expertenrat für Klimafragen, 2023a). Similar criticism was voiced by environmental NGOs (BUND, 2024).

To outline how the climate targets are going to be met, the federal government needs to produce a climate action programme whenever the Climate Action plan is updated. The action programme needs to include cross-sectoral measures as well as measures for each individual sector. In case targets have not been met, the climate action programme needs to include additional immediate actions that will ensure fulfilment of the targets. The latest climate action programme, passed in October 2023, included 130 measures: 20 cross-sectoral measures in addition to specific measures for each of the above-mentioned sectors (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, 2023a).

Cross-sectoral measures cover a wide array of areas, ranging from information campaigns on different energy-related topics, stricter energy efficiency targets, and reforming levies and charges in the energy system through de-bureaucratisation of subsidy programmes and planning procedures related to renewable energy projects, to the full launch of the ‘Climate Club’ of the G-7 countries and a national strategy for securing the supply of skilled workers.

One of the cross-sectoral measures in the climate action programme that is particularly relevant to trade unions’ concerns is “the design of a socially just transformation” (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, 2023a, p. 25). Such a transformation is said to include four key aspects. First, the federal government, under the lead of the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) and together with the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), intends to implement a ‘social monitoring for climate change

mitigation' that looks at the distributional effects of climate change measures and to develop proposals to remedy these effects. Second, the compatibility of climate change mitigation with equitable living conditions by, amongst others, letting regions participate in changes, has to be safeguarded. This includes expansion of regional structural development programmes to ensure sufficient funding for regional transformation processes. Third, the federal government will offer financial support to coal regions and coal power plant locations through the STARK programme (Stärkung der Transformationsdynamik und Aufbruch in den Revieren und an den Kohlestandorten). Fourth, the federal government intends to support underfunded municipalities in financing personnel to help them tap means from the federal programmes for municipal climate change and energy management. While the Council of Experts welcomed this set of measures, it criticised the lack of elaboration concerning how these measures should be implemented in practice, or what priority they are given in the implementation of all measures (Expertenrat für Klimafragen, 2023b).

Next to the measures stipulated in the climate action programme, two emission trading schemes (ETS) are a central pillar of Germany's cross-sectoral climate mitigation efforts. Next to the European ETS, which targets emissions from industry, power plants and air traffic, Germany has also introduced a complementary national ETS for CO₂ emissions from heating and transport, including petrol, diesel, oil for heating, liquid gas, natural gas and coal. The German Fuel Emissions Trading Act (BEHG - Gesetz über einen nationalen Zertifikatehandel für Brennstoffemissionen, 2019) – first passed in 2019 and since then reformed twice (Deutsche Emissionshandelsstelle, 2023) – sets a yearly increasing price for emissions from fuels in these sectors. In light of the increased financial burden, particularly for lower-income households, in their 2021 Coalition Agreement the federal government had originally intended to implement the so-called "Klimageld" (climate allowance): direct, equal payments to all citizens to redistribute part of the revenues of the ETS (SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen

and FDP, 2021). However, implementation of this measure has been effectively cancelled, officially due to the lack of a means to directly transfer money to all citizens, but in actual fact due more to a lack of political will (Burtscher, 2023).

The Council's biennial report from February 2025 has also addressed social imbalances in the government's funding programmes, pointing particularly to the imbalance in favour of materially wealthy households: While homeowners could benefit from subsidies for retrofitting and heating systems, and those able to afford a car from EV bonuses, renters and those not using a car (and thus causing less emissions in the first place) did not eventually receive the climate allowance (Klimageld) they had been promised. The council advocates for investment in climate-friendly public infrastructures and socially graded financial support as countermeasures (Expertenrat für Klimafragen, 2025).

Overall, the German federal government has proposed and implemented a wide variety of climate policy measures, with a marked emphasis on market- and information-based instruments. While regulatory measures are included in the form of efficiency and building standards, restrictions on new gas boilers and the phase-out of coal mining and power plants, they play a subordinate role in industry, transport and agriculture, partly due to EU regulation, partly for ideological reasons. Moreover, government policy measures have a strong focus on the supply side.

At first glance these measures may seem comprehensive and ambitious. However, this does not stand up to expert assessment. The Council of Experts on Climate Change has repeatedly admonished the federal government to implement more effective measures, particularly in the transport and building sector (Expertenrat für Klimafragen, 2023a). While the Council confirmed that Germany had reduced its emissions by 10 per cent in 2023, more than ever in the country's history, it also noted that it was "above all the strong decline in production in the energy

intensive industry”, “the generally weak economic performance” and the mild temperatures in 2023 that accounted for this (Expertenrat für Klimafragen, 2024). Without these conditions, the Council concludes, it would have been unlikely for Germany to meet its climate targets. A similar assessment of the data for 2024 is to be expected (Wehnemann et al., 2025).

Likewise, the Climate Action Tracker – an independent scientific project of two climate research organisations (Climate Analytics and NewClimate Institute, 2023) – rates Germany’s policies as “insufficient”, concluding that “the government would need a step change in pace to be able to meet its own emission target, which itself is not ambitious enough to be considered 1.5°C compatible” (Climate Analytics and NewClimate Institute, 2023). At current, Germany can thus hardly as unambiguously be seen as a forerunner in climate politics as has been styling itself to be. One reason for this may be found in polarised public and political discourses and opinions, which have at times paralysed effective policy implementation particularly in the most problematic sectors: transport, buildings and agriculture.

2.1.2 Climate policy discourses, opinions and conflicts

Climate policy implementation does not occur in a vacuum. It is, among other things, shaped by political debates, media and wider public discourses (Feindt and Oels, 2005). To better comprehend some of the tensions between ambitions at being a forerunner and the lack in effective and ambitious climate policy implementation that experts continue to criticize, German climate policy needs to be understood in the context of:

1. Increasing support for the climate denialist far-right AfD and growing populist opposition against climate policies from parties such as BSW,
2. A constitutional balanced budget rule, ‘debt brake’ (Schuldenbremse), that despite the 2025 reform, limits public investment capacity,

3. The entrenched political influence of major agricultural and industry lobby groups particularly on the centre-right parties.

First, the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) challenges the general consensus among the core democratic parties to commit to the climate targets set out in the Paris Climate Agreement and enshrined in EU and national legislation. For instance, in a parliamentary motion in September 2023 and in their programme for the 2025 federal election, the AfD denies the scientific consensus around the human role in climate change and its ongoing consequences in terms of extreme weather and natural catastrophes (Alternative für Deutschland, 2025). Moreover, the party’s parliamentary group demanded that Germany unilaterally terminate any international agreement stipulating mandatory climate mitigation targets (Deutscher Bundestag, 2023). Less extreme, albeit still disruptive, is the position of the new social-populist party BSW, which argues for a continued reliance on imported gas and oil from Russia in the foreseeable future, dismissing renewable energy expansion targets as unrealistic (Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht, 2024).

But this signals something more deeply rooted: Particularly among the lower socio-economic strata there is a growing wariness of any climate action due to fears of a rising cost of living (Fritz and Eversberg, 2024), actively played on by tabloid newspapers especially in relation to the Building Energy Act (Gebäudeenergiegesetz), by the AfD and partly by the Christian Social Union (CSU). Polls indicate that those supporting the AfD and Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW) are significantly more opposed to climate policy proposals (Knollenborg and Sommer, 2023; Schulz and Trappmann, 2024). This was also visible in recent regional elections in East Germany as well as in the federal election in February 2025.

By firmly establishing itself on the far right and promoting climate denialist arguments from within parliament, the AfD has been able to shift the discourse of the traditionally centre-right parties.

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The government would need a step change in pace to be able to meet its own emission target, which itself is not ambitious enough to be considered 1.5°C compatible.

Climate Analytics and
NewClimate Institute, 2023



The Greens and climate politics, particularly the use of regulatory instruments to prescribe or prohibit actions or behaviours, have become the main target of political attacks not just from the far, but also the conservative right (Orde, 2023; Tagesschau.de, 2024). This has created a heated atmosphere, most visible in media campaigns against the Building Energy Act, threats against Green politicians to the point of needing police protection for regular election campaigning (Eichmann, 2023) and aggressive farmers' protests against the phase-out of agricultural subsidies (BR24 Redaktion and Wolf, 2024). This has culminated in both the conservative opposition and the co-governing liberal party behaving increasingly tactically, even forcing revision of once-set national frameworks for climate mitigation (recent CCA reform), and starkly ramping up their anti-green rhetoric during the 2025 election campaign.

The second crucial factor was the political aftermath of the ruling of Germany's constitutional court on the balanced budget in 2023. On a legal complaint brought forward by the CDU/CSU, the judges ruled that the federal government's move to reallocate €60 bn of unused funds from the Corona pandemic emergency fund towards climate mitigation measures had been unconstitutional

(Polansky, 2023), ripping a substantial hole in the federal budget. One of the consequences were significant cuts to funding for climate mitigation measures, amounting to €45 billion until 2027 alone, at a time when economists estimate the need for additional investments at €600 billion over the coming ten years (Dullien et al., 2024). The recent reform of the balanced budget or 'debt brake', passed on 18 March 2025 by the Bundestag, included an additional €100 bn for climate change as part of a €500bn special budget over the coming 12 years. Yet, except for aspects of national security, which are now exempted, the general strict debt rule remains in place for all other public spending (Deutscher Bundestag, 2025). On the other hand, one measure to cut funds was the removal of environmentally harmful tax exemptions for agricultural vehicles and fuel (Reimer and Teigeler, 2024), which prompted aggressive wide-scale national farmers protests (Alparslan, 2024; BR24 Redaktion and Wolf, 2024; Fleck, 2024).

Third, the partial retraction of these agricultural subsidy removals in reaction to the aggressive farmer protests also illustrates the power of industrial lobby groups over German policy on the federal level (Hummel, 2024). The gas lobby is another one. As reported by the NGO

LobbyControl (Deckwirth, 2023; Katzemich, 2023) and various newspaper outlets (Dierßen, 2023; Staude, 2023), the gas industry had preferential access to the federal government and ministers responsible for the Buildings Energy Act, another object of substantial contention, while experts from environmental NGOs and academia were not heard. Deckwirth (2023) from LobbyControl concluded that the public information process was “one-sided”. Similarly, contrary to the overwhelming support of the public for a phase out of sales of new cars with a combustion engine by 2035, the CDU/CSU and FDP, supported by parts of the automobile lobby, are heavily campaigning against EU phase-out plans (Stöcker, 2024), while the German Association of the Automotive Industry (VDA) has lobbied for an earlier amendment to the EU vehicle emission performance standard (Verband der Automobilindustrie, 2024), which then economic minister Robert Habeck intended to support (Packroff, 2024).

As we will describe later on, it is in relation to this socio-political context of growing support for climate-sceptical far right parties, restricted public finances for necessary investments and a powerful industry lobby that unions’ strategies and demands relating to climate policy need to be understood.

2.1.3 Key actors in climate policy

Varying stakeholders are involved at different levels in the German climate policy discourse. In public debates around climate policy, grassroots movements such as Fridays For Future, “Letzte Generation” or “Ende Gelände” play a prominent role, receiving large-scale media coverage. These actors are, however, relegated to the sidelines at the institutionalised level of federal policymaking, which in recent years has still been characterised by adherence to a corporatist tradition that admits well-established societal actors representing labour, industry and environmental concerns to the table. With the following examples, we aim to provide an overview of official high-level forms of consultation. While this list is not exhaustive – amongst others leaving out the informal channels of communication – it highlights the set-up of key institutional actors in Germany’s climate policy arena.

In matters of overarching importance and with long-term impacts, there is a long tradition of German governments resorting to corporatist forms of consultation in developing key policies. The Coal Phase-Out Act (Kohleausstiegsgesetz), arguably the single most consequential piece of legislation in relation to decarbonisation so far, resulted from such a consultation procedure. It was drafted by the Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment, colloquially known as the “Coal Commission”. This body, established by the then-ruling grand coalition (CDU/CSU and SPD) in 2018 (BMW, 2019) (Kommission ‘Wachstum, Strukturwandel und Beschäftigung’, 2019), was comprised of federal and regional politicians as well as representatives of labour unions, employers, environmental NGOs, locally affected populations, and academics. The compromise bill it drew up, published in early 2019 and later enshrined in law, set 2038 as an end date to coal and provided €40 billion in funds for compensation and structural change in the affected regions.

The now-dissolved Social Democratic-Green-Liberal government has also tapped into this tradition, assembling an Alliance for Transformation (“Allianz für Transformation”) as a corporatist advisory circle to the Federal Chancellery in June 2022. It is described as a forum for “high-level-conversations” between chancellor, federal government ministers and top-level individuals from business, unions, NGOs, associations and varying academic experts (Bundesregierung, 2022). “Transformation” in this context is used as an umbrella term, referring to expected changes to the economy and society in relation to climate neutrality, digitalisation and resilience. In each yearly meeting, stakeholders discuss a particular element of transformation – for example jobs in the energy transformation, economic potentials of the renewable energy sector, circular economy – and issue joint papers and communiqués as a result (Allianz für Transformation, 2024a, 2024b). Additionally, two task forces for the energy transformation developed and published measures to boost production capacities and meet the demand for qualified workers (Allianz für Transformation,

2023b, 2023a). While the joint statements and agreements are non-binding, government selectively takes up recommendations into legislative projects. For instance, results from the most recent meeting in January 2024 are to be integrated into the national circular economy strategy (Nationale Kreislaufwirtschaftsstrategie) (Bundeskanzleramt, 2024). At this moment it is unclear whether the work of the Alliance for Transformation will continue under a new government.

There are also several different institutional structures within the German Sustainable Development Strategy that play their part in the area of climate policy (Bundesregierung, 2021). First, the Dialogue Group is comprised of fifteen institutional actors from business, civil society, environmental associations and labour. Second, the Council for Sustainable Development (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung), established in 2001, equally consists of 15 members appointed ad personam by the Federal Chancellor for a three-year period. The current Council includes academic scholars, trade union chairpersons, business leaders, politicians and leaders of environmental associations. It is chaired by Reiner Hoffmann, a former DGB president. Third, the Forum Nachhaltigkeit is a yearly meeting between the federal government and around 100 key actors from business, civil society and academia to discuss the state and development of the German Sustainability Strategy and national implementation of the Agenda 2030.

These examples demonstrate the institutional embeddedness of actors representing business, labour and environmental concerns in the political processes around climate and transformation policy in Germany. The composition of Germany's former 'traffic light' Coalition Government, comprising SPD (social democrats), die Grünen (the Greens) and FDP (liberal democrats), in itself underlined this approach to political decision-making. Yet its highly conflictual and divided mode of operations, which led to the dissolution of the government in December 2024, also clearly illustrates the limits to this cooperative model, and the difficulty of moderating the substantial tensions that exist. It is

in this conflictual constellation, as we will further discuss later, that unions in Germany perceive themselves as an arbiter between environmental and business interests, a role they seek to fill by underlining the social dimension within a transition towards net zero.

2.2 Organized labour in Germany

Germany's model of industrial relations rests on two pillars: collective bargaining agreements and codetermination. While there are many intricacies in relation to the application of these two arrangements, here we briefly outline their main elements. For readers from German union circles or engaged in German industrial relations, this will be all too familiar. Yet, for all others, the following subsections will provide a general understanding of the institutional environment in which labour unions in Germany make decisions and attempt to realise worker demands.

2.2.1 Collective bargaining

Sectoral bargaining constitutes the first of two elements in the German model of industrial relations. A collective bargaining agreement is a binding contract between employers, or employer associations, and labour unions. The agreement sets out rights and duties of employees such as working conditions in relation to pay, benefits, working time and holidays (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023j).

Labour unions and employer associations engage in collective bargaining processes predominantly at the industry-region level (Müller-Jentsch, 2008). Unlike in other countries, such as France, Denmark or Norway, "the German government is mostly excluded from industrial relations" (Jäger, Noy and Schoefer, 2022a, p. 60). This freedom from state involvement, most notably captured in the notion of "Tarifautonomie" (autonomy in collective bargaining) is a crucial element of the German industrial relations system.

In Germany there are two basic types of collective bargaining agreements. 8 per cent of workers are covered by firm-specific collective bargaining agreements (Ellguth and Kohaut, 2021), so called “Haustarifverträge”. This type is less common and mostly applies to large companies (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023j). The main form of bargaining coverage, applying to 41 per cent of workers, are sectoral (Branchentarifvertrag), regional (Flächentarifvertrag) and association-specific (Verbandstarifvertrag) agreements (Ellguth and Kohaut, 2021). No matter what type of collective bargaining agreement, it is solely the union that bargains with the employer or employer association.

Labour unions are organized along sectoral affiliation and associated in a few trade union confederations. The largest and most powerful trade union confederation in Germany is the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB). Its members include some of the largest unions such as ver.di, the union of public sector and service workers; IG Metall, the industrial union for metal and manufacturing; IG BCE, the industrial union for mining and chemical industries; IG BAU, the industrial union for construction, agriculture and the environment; GEW, the union for education and science; NGG, the union for food, beverage and catering; GdP, the police union; and EVG, the union for rail and transport. Together these unions have more than 5.6 million members (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023b). The second largest confederation is the Deutscher Beamtenbund (DBB), composed of civil service unions with around 1.3 million members overall (Deutscher Beamtenbund, 2023), and the Christian union confederation (CGB), which reports having roughly 300.000 members organized in several independent unions (Der Christliche Gewerkschaftsbund Deutschlands, 2022). The latter is generally considered a business-friendly ‘yellow union’.

Employer associations are organized at the sectoral-regional level and tend to belong to an umbrella federation, the Confederation of German Employers’ Associations (BDA). The BDA’s members include 14 regional associations and 47 federal professional

associations, among them Gesamtmetall, Arbeitgeberverband der Versicherungsunternehmen in Deutschland and the Bundesarbeitgeberverband Chemie – three powerful umbrella associations for the metal and electrical, insurance and chemical industry (Bundesvereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände, 2023).

Due to their crucial role in collective bargaining, labour unions remain a central actor in industrial relations in Germany, despite a massive fall in trade union density from 33 per cent in 1992 (Schäfer, 2020) to around 17 per cent in 2022 (Fulda, 2022). Collective bargaining coverage is still more pronounced, but has also decreased, from 76 per cent in 1998 to 49 per cent in 2022 (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023h). Developments in partial decentralization of collective bargaining to the firm level have in part led to the erosion of collective bargaining coverage in Germany (ibid.).

2.2.2 Codetermination

The second important element of the German industrial relations system is codetermination at the firm level. Codetermination refers to employees’ legally guaranteed rights to actively participate in decisions relating to their situation in the workplace (Kotthoff, 2013). There are two types or forms of codetermination: works councils (workplace codetermination) and representation on corporate supervisory boards (company-level codetermination).

Works councils

Works councils are the central pillar of workplace interest representation. They are elected every four years in nationally coordinated elections by a firm’s workforce, and represent the rights and interests of employees against the management (Schnabel, 2020). According to the Works Constitution Act (Betriebsverfassungsgesetz, § 1) workers in any firm with more than five employees have the right to form and elect a works council. As a body of representatives elected by all employees in the firm, works councils are often dominated by union members, but in many cases also feature non-unionized members, rivalling factions, or are wholly unorganized.

In 2019, 40 per cent of workers were employed in workplaces with a works council (Schnabel, 2020). As with collective bargaining, there is a clear relationship between firm size and the presence of a works council. Whereas only 6 per cent of workplaces with 5-50 employees have a works council, 70 per cent of firms with 200-500 employees and 86 per cent of firms with more than 501 employees have them (Ellguth and Kohaut, 2021).

The Works Constitution Act gives works councils access to a number of rights and prerogatives: information, consultation and co-determination (Carley, Baradel and Welz, 2005). Information applies to product, investment and other business decisions that are deemed the prerogative of management. Worker representatives are informed about the financial situation of the company and consulted on changes that are likely to affect workers. In short, works councils are kept in the loop and allowed to comment, but the employer does not have to listen to their advice.

Consultation rights, applying to personnel-related decisions, give works councils the right to “veto transfers, dismissals, appointments of employees if they are able to prove that the employers acted unfairly or violated existing agreements” (Jäger, Noy and Schoefer, 2022b). Lastly, as long as not covered by collective bargaining agreements, codetermination rights (Mitbestimmung) give works councils the power to co-decide in areas not regulated by collective agreements, such as workplace monitoring, working time or pay methods (Carley et al., 2005). Outcomes must be a joint decision by the employer and the works council (Streeck, 1995). In addition to these aspects, works councils can also negotiate firm-level deviations from collective bargaining agreements if these are allowed for.

Board representation

The second form of codetermination is advisory board representation. Companies with more than 500 employees must have worker representatives on their supervisory boards. The supervisory board elects and supervises a firm’s executive board

and participates in major strategic investment and operational decisions.

There are different forms of worker representation – minority, quasi-parity and parity – that determine the allocation of supervisory board seats to labour and thus determine the degree of codetermination and power labour holds at the board table (Kißler, Greifenstein and Schneider, 2011). According to the Participation Act (Drittelbeteiligungsgesetz), in companies with 500 to 2000 employees worker representatives have the right to occupy one third of the seats on the supervisory board (minority representation). In companies with more than 2000 employees, as stipulated in the Codetermination Act 1976, half of the seats on the supervisory board belong to worker representatives; though in case of a tie, the capital side has the decisive vote (quasi-parity). A special rule applies to companies with more than 1000 employees in the coal, iron and steel sectors. As outlined in the Coal, Steel and Mining Codetermination Law (Montan-Mitbestimmungsgesetz), in these special cases worker representatives receive half of the seats without a tie-breaking vote for shareholders (parity representation), and there is a worker representative on the executive board.

Board representation gives employees a direct voice in their employer’s strategic decisions. However, “like shareholder representatives, worker representatives have a fiduciary duty to the company (rather than to workers), which leads to occasional tensions” (Jäger, Noy and Schoefer, 2022b, p. 71).



2.3 The role of labour unions and organized labour in climate policy

Describing and analysing the role of labour unions in climate policy in Germany requires an understanding of unions' self-conception. In addition to membership size and coverage of industries and occupations, the DGB has a strong political and institutional standing. We will thus centre our analysis on the DGB and its member unions.

The preamble of the DGB's (1996, p. 2) Basic Programme, which is still in force to this day, states that:

“Labour unions represent the interests of people in work, those that seek an apprenticeship and work, those that are unemployed or retired. They are interest groups that pursue their goals and demands against other interests, if necessary, through strikes. They were formed to develop a countervailing force against employer and

capital power and to overcome exploitation and oppression through solidarity. Yet, labour unions are also societal organisations with an overarching political mandate that they implement with other social movements and political forces. The vision of a future worth living, in which freedom, social justice, prosperity and ecological responsibility are guaranteed, guides our work... They must fight for a different future, for societal alternatives, for overcoming socially unjust and ecologically unbearable conditions.”

This emphasis on the multidimensional interests of their members and employees within the sectors they represent is affirmed by all the DGB member unions (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2010; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2020b; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2021; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022b; Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, 2022). In other words, according to their statutes, unions consider themselves both

advocacy or lobby groups for their members, and for workers more generally, as well as social movements with an overarching societal mandate. This, as we will discuss in more detail in chapter 3, can create tensions between abstract, general and long-term dimensions of unions' demands – social justice, freedom, climate action, etc. – and more immediate, particular and short-term demands, such as maintaining industry jobs or energy-intensive production.

The DGB statute and those of member unions specify that achieving these goals requires the representation and coordination of interests, among others, by informing and consulting the federal parliament, the Länder parliaments, governments, administration, institutions of the European Union as well as international organisations, on employees' interests regarding current topics, and proposing demands and initiatives to further them. In more concrete terms, this entails attempting to directly influence legislation, the use of collective bargaining agreements, and, if necessary, strike action.

2.3.1 Channels of influence

In line with this self-conception, labour unions tend to use five channels to influence climate policy in Germany. These can be categorised as information provision, formal consultation, informal consultation, collective bargaining and coalition building, as succinctly summarised by interviewee 12:

“Writing political papers... A lot is simply about monitoring political developments... To see where one has to intervene and write an official commentary. Of course, networking is also a part of the traditional lobbying but also the topic of building alliances.”

Interviewee 12

Information provision

All of the major labour unions in Germany actively and openly voice their positions on various topics related to climate change and their sectors through strategy papers and press releases. In most instances, unions state detailed demands

specific to their sectors (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2018; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023c).

Formal Consultation

As outlined above, there are established institutionalised fora for discussions between labour unions and high-level policymakers. This gives labour unions an opportunity to have their voice heard at the highest levels of federal policymaking.

In many of these formal fora, it is not the individual unions who are present, but the DGB (see for instance the “Allianz für Transformation” or the “Dialogue Group”). In other instances, such as the Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment, labour unions representing workers in the affected sectors were present at the table. This allowed these unions to bargain specifically for their members and workers in the sector in general. Similarly, Michael Vassiliadis, chairperson of the IG BCE, co-chaired an expert group installed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) on gas and heating (ExpertInnen-Kommission Gas und Wärme).

The DGB and its member unions are also routinely formally invited to comment in written form on policy proposals/bills at various stages of the policy process. The major labour unions or the DGB tend to sit on political working groups related to various economic topics.

In some instances, they are invited to expert hearings to additionally provide oral feedback and engage with questions from the respective MP working groups.

Informal Consultation

All major labour unions and the DGB have liaison departments (Verbindungsstellen/Verbindungsbüros) to initiate contact with politicians and political parties. In most instances these liaison departments are split into German and EU politics, with offices in Berlin and Brussels.

As the DGB writes on their website regarding the liaison office in Berlin:

“The liaison department for federal politics is the point of contact between the DGB and the federal political institutions such as Government/Ministries, Parliament/Parliamentary Groups and the Federal Council/Länder-Governments, as well as the Federal Parties and the employer organisations of the parties and parliamentary groups. It organises the exchange of information about political programmes and initiatives – both from the DGB to politics and from politics to the DGB.”

Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023i

However, in addition to these political offices and bureaus, networking and personal contacts are an important form of informal consultation for labour unions, as interviewees stressed. Such informal consultation, for instance, occurs at evening events hosted by unions, foundations, employer associations and networking events organised by the various political parties. These informal settings allow the different stakeholders to discuss topics and issues more openly without the fear of being misquoted by news outlets.

Collective bargaining

As explained in section 2.2.1, collective bargaining agreements stipulate rights and obligations in relation to working conditions. As such, they can and have been a useful tool to enshrine particular employee rights and employer obligations in respect to climate change policy. Especially, climate adaptation measures that relate to health and safety obligations such as extreme heat for employees who have to work outside (Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, 2020b), but also the topic of working time and working time reduction (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2020a) have been regulated through collective bargaining agreements.

Coalition building

Coalition building in climate policy has become more prominent among the DGB and its member unions. For instance, in 2023, the three major industrial

unions – IG Metall, IG BAU and IGBCE – published a joint position paper comprising short-, medium- and long-term demands for a stable political framework for energy intensive industries in Germany (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt and Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2023).

Beyond joint statements among themselves, on specific occasions, labour unions join forces with environmental NGOs and other civil society organisations to increase the reach and weight of their demands. As part of the “Klima-Allianz Deutschland”, the WWF, Germanwatch, misereor, Klimabündnis Deutschland and the Protestant Church of Westphalia, the DGB, ver.di and the IG BAU published a position paper calling to establish the conditions for all municipalities to engage in socially just climate change mitigation action. Another example is a joint paper on required policy measures and instruments for the transformation towards climate neutrality published by the IGBCE, WWF, Germanwatch and DNR, the umbrella organisation of environmental NGOs (2024).

A third form of coalition is the joint work of unions, employer and industry associations. One example is “Chemie3” (Verband der Chemischen Industrie, Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie and Bundesarbeitgeberverband Chemie, 2018), a sustainability initiative of the German chemical industry comprising the Association of the Chemical Industry (VCI), the IGBCE and the Federal Employers’ Association for the Chemical Industry (BAVC).

In theory, all major labour unions can make use of these channels of influence in the same manner. In practice, however, a union’s ability to influence policy depends on the power resources at its disposal (Refslund and Arnholtz, 2022).

2.3.2 Union power

Labour unions represent workers in all sectors of the German economy. As described above, the unionisation rate stands at around 16 per cent, and 49 per cent of all employees are covered by

collective bargaining agreements. Institutionally, employment protection is comparatively high, with a well-established collective bargaining system and codetermination rights. Labour unions also remain a pillar of German political corporatism. This gives them a strong institutional footing. They are invited to comment on policy proposals and bills on a regular basis, sit in various high-level political working groups and feature prominently in the media. Lastly, they do not shy away from forming coalitions with other unions, employer associations or NGOs.

As such, and compared to other countries, labour unions in Germany wield a considerable degree of power to influence policy making. Yet, in a historical context, with structural labour market changes, reforms of the social security system infringing on workers' protections, and massive falls in both collective bargaining and membership, labour unions' power resources have largely been on the decline (Streeck, 2010; Urban, 2010).

There are significant differences in unions' influence on public policy resulting from variations in power resources. Germany's economy is highly export dependent, with an export to GDP ratio of 51 per cent (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023a). The most important exported goods are vehicles and vehicle parts, industrial machines, chemicals, electrical goods, pharmaceuticals, metals as well as rubber and plastics (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023b). In short, industrial products are the backbone of Germany's export-driven economic model.

From this structural perspective, the IG Metall, representing 2.1 million members in crucial sectors such as automotive, aviation, steel, electronics and plastics, can be considered the most powerful and resourceful union in Germany. But IG BCE, the union for mining, chemicals and energy, is also structurally vital. In addition to the export-oriented chemical and pharmaceutical industries, the IG BCE represents workers in the mining and energy sectors, which provide some of the indispensable inputs for industrial production. This degree of

structural power as representing the backbone of Germany's economic might gives these two unions a seat at policy tables, opening doors to formal and informal consultation as a channel of influence. How these superior structural power resources translate into formal consultation and institutionalised influence is exemplified by the sole presence of the IG Metall at the Mobility Summit at the Chancellor's Office in January 2023 and absence of the EVG and ver.di despite them representing railway workers and those in public transport (deutschlandfunk.de, 2023), as well as the IG BCE's chairman Michael Vassiliadis co-chairing an expert commission on gas and heating.

In terms of organisational power resources, the three largest unions are the IG Metall (2.1 million members), ver.di (1.9 million members) and the IG BCE (580,000 members). While the IG BCE thus has a significantly lower number of members compared to for instance ver.di, its sectoral unionisation rate is several times higher. The IG Metall has both: a large number of members and unionisation rate around 40 per cent. This gives the IG BCE, but in particular the IG Metall, considerable and comparatively strong organisational power. Still, union density and collective bargaining coverage are issues in important future industries such as the wind sector, as several interviewees highlighted.

As interviewee 9 and 12 stated, being a large labour union with close to 2 million paying members has another advantage: The IG Metall can employ significantly more full-time officials to work on topics and strategies important to the union and its members. While smaller unions take action on topics relating to their specific sectors, general positions are put forward as collective demands through the DGB. Power to influence politics derives from collective mobilisation of resources. Reaching consensus among all unions and communicating this collective front rather than each union fighting for itself is what creates the basis for any type of opportunity to challenge other key political stakeholders to effectively promote workers' interests. The DGB can thus be seen as

its members' lobby arm that ties up the various interests into a collective bundle.

“The labour unions are of course [active] in their sectors, in their organisations and in their workplaces. [The DGB is] more like a political lobby organisation. That is kind of a division of labour... the DGB [tries] to avoid competition and instead has a holistic view of all industries and workers so that employers cannot play out employees against one another...”

Interviewee 6

Relations with other stakeholders such as political parties in government or employers translate union resources into influence (Jemine, 2023). For instance, even if labour institutions remain unchanged as do the other power resources, a change in government or senior leadership of employer associations might dramatically change unions' ability to influence political decisions. Certain political parties are more likely to have an open ear for labour unions than others. One union official summarised the relations with the different major German political parties in the following way:

“Let me put it like this: 30 years ago we had classic allies, the Social Democrats... The Greens have limited acceptance for union demands... I would say on par with that of the CDU. Even though I have the feeling that sometimes we receive more attention from them [CDU].... Regarding the FDP, we don't have to talk about it, they never thought much of us. And the Left of course has had a clearly propagated propaganda. Sure, often our topics, but their influence is rather insignificant”

Interviewee 5

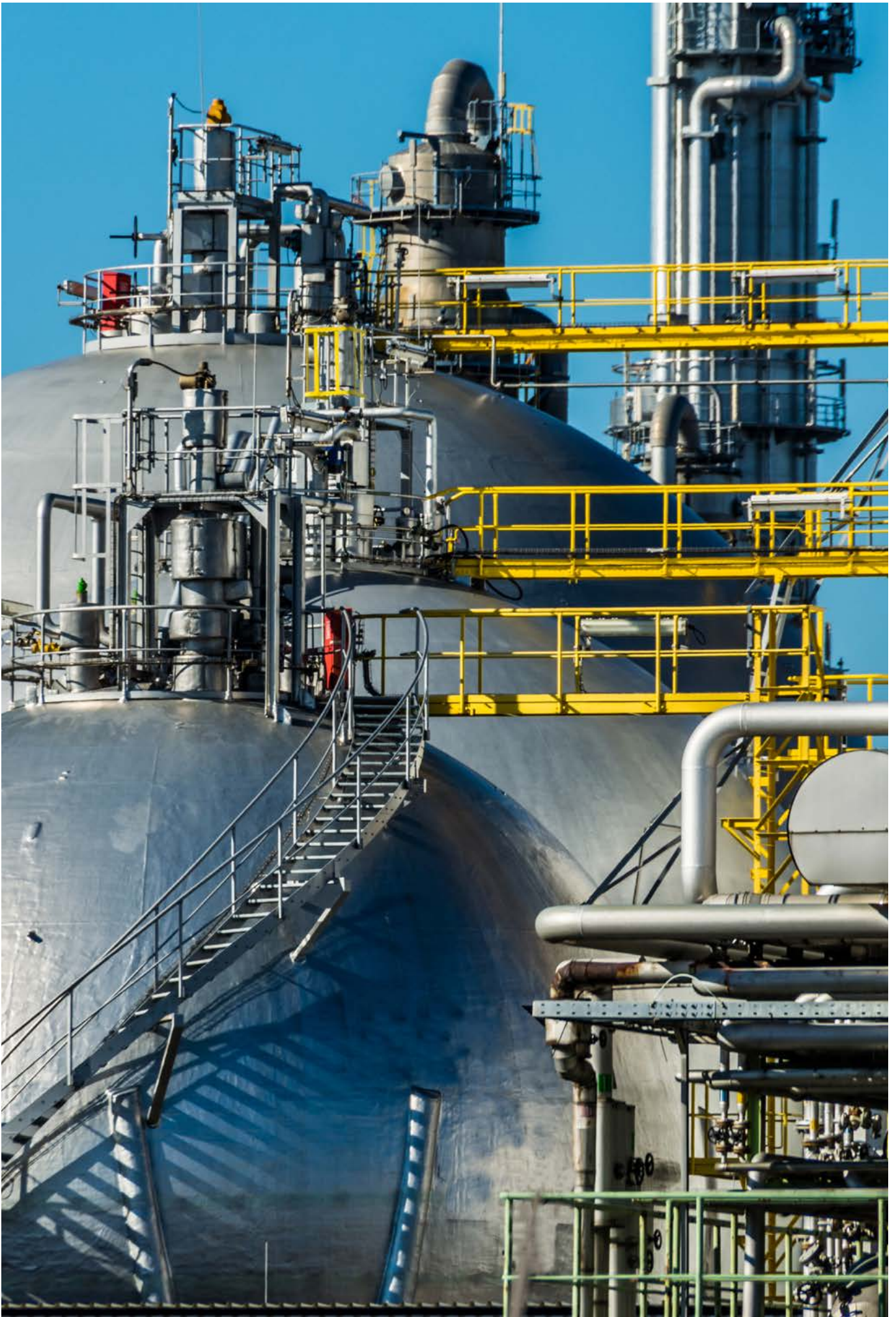
The weight of unions' actions and words thus also depends on the actors the union is attempting to influence. Since 2021, the Social Democrats were running the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), while the Greens led BMWK. This setup affects the area of federal politics. Unions are more likely to be received amicably

and constructively in certain ministries, as another interviewee explained:

“... I have some contact with the labour ministry [BMAS]. They are significantly more friendly to unions, aren't they. In the economic ministry [BMWK], I would say they forget, ignore [us]. I wouldn't accuse them of doing this on purpose, but they definitely like to forget about us... Through the Greens' participation [in the coalition government] of course green NGOs have clearly gained influence. Clearly. And, like I said, in regard to the economic ministry we have not necessarily won”

Interviewee 8

In sum, how unions' multidimensional channels of influence translate into policy impact depends on the overall political set-up – who is in power, which parties run the different ministries – on the one hand, and each labour union's specific power resources on the other. While organisational power has decreased for all unions in Germany over the past decades, due to their important structural position in Germany's economy and relatively high shares of unionisation, the IG Metall and the IG BCE can be seen as the most powerful unions in Germany.



3. Labour's Just Transition debates and policies in Germany



3.1 Labour unions' mainstream climate positions and demands

The DGB and its members explicitly acknowledge and support the Paris Climate Agreement and the climate targets of the German federal government, both in official press documents (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021, p. 55; Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023f; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, 2023; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a) and in our interviews.

“I would say, in terms of the 1.5° target, we have all agreed to it; there is no question about it.”

Interviewee 6

Above all, labour unions share a unanimous conviction that Germany should remain an industrial economy, while producing in the most technologically advanced and least environmentally harmful way possible (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2018; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023a; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023a; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a). A recurring concern voiced by unions in their policy statements and motions put forward at congresses (Trappmann et al., 2024; Flemming 2022) is the fear that excessively stringent climate policies might lead to an exodus of foundation industries and manufacturing plants. This is seen as a threat to be avoided, both from a social and an ecological point of view: Jobs in Germany would be lost, and the same products manufactured with lower environmental standards abroad ('carbon leakage') (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2018; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2022; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2022b; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023c). The following two quotes exemplify this feared vision for Germany:

“We all have the same fundamental attitude. Here and there are nuances. We all agree that Germany must not be deindustrialised.”

Interviewee 6

“We will do that and we want to go there [transforming industries] because we want to keep our industry. Because anything else would mean that there won't be any industry at some point... And then in the worst case we would be like England...”

Interviewee 12

As an advocate for workers, on the one hand, and an organisation with a broader societal orientation, on the other, labour unions perceive themselves as having to navigate between two equally dangerous pitfalls that they perceive different political forces to be advocating for. One of them is to push for a fast and radical transformation of the economic system without adequately considering the consequences for workers, the other is to play down climate change as less dramatic and accept only incremental, narrowly technological solutions. Interviewee 1 from one of the industrial unions put this bluntly:

“And of course, as an industrial union one is not on the side of those that ... say post-growth, universal basic income and abandon industry. Extremely pointedly put, but yes. And on the other hand, we are not on the side of those that say: yes, this is all a bit exaggerated ... with climate change and ... let's build a few new wind parks and expand PV [photovoltaic] and then everything will be fine. That would be the other extreme pole which we do not associate ourselves with.”

To reconcile social, employment-related and ecological goals, unions argue for the necessity of thoroughly transforming all sectors of the economy - in a way that protects their members and boosts forms of good work (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2020; Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax and Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2021; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021, p. 55; Eisenbahn- und

Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022a; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a). This, as we already briefly touched upon in chapter 2, can lead to tensions. As interviewee 3 puts it:

“Human-made climate change in terms of threatening our livelihoods is a reality... Now, there are short-, mid- and long-term interests. The long-term interest [is] clearly for all, unequivocally, the maintenance of our livelihoods. In the short-term there is, however, the need for social security...”

Another interviewee used the planned and passed phase-out of coal as an example to describe this tension further:

“This dilemma, representing employees and members, in this balancing act, to say ‘do we still want coal?’ and to achieve and change mentalities, to say, we need to understand that this cannot be the future... I think... maybe this was the first time for the [union name] ... to say: ‘How should we position ourselves?’ And we see that this is not the future. We cannot continue like this, but we need to think about how we ... tell this to politicians and how we can design and implement a transition.”

Interviewee 6

Crucially, not despite but rather because of these tensions, labour unions perceive themselves as one, if not the crucial actor in Germany for mediating between the various ecological, social and economic interests involved in transformation.

“And we as unions perceive ourselves also a bit like a mediator for this process. Because we believe – no we do not only believe this, it factually is the case – we are the ones that are actually in the position to deescalate this process where tensions arise. Our societal contract also implies, I would say, to support our colleagues’ awareness in the right direction”

Interviewee 6

In Germany’s corporatist system, as described above, with environmental NGOs on the one side and industrial associations on the other, labour unions take on the role as mediator. Successfully resolving this tension requires them to come up with detailed plans on how each sector needs to transform and how this can be done in a socially just way.

“And to combine the two and to translate this politically into concrete transformation processes in individual sectors... that is our core task: to make sure that we’ll achieve this transformation in the long-term but simultaneously to do this in a way that is just and fair for and with our colleagues.”

Interviewee 3

Regarding climate policy, labour unions in Germany are in agreement that there is a lack of integration of social and employment policies into climate policy. In their view, successfully mitigating climate change may only be possible if climate policy is combined with and integrated into a comprehensive set of social and employment policies (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2020; Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax and Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2021; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022a; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a). Without an awareness that there are “human beings working” and that “there are great political risks [rise of the far right] associated with a failure to design the transformation not only ecologically but also socially” (Interviewee 3), the transformation towards climate neutrality is seen as likely to fail.

To unions, achieving this goal of maintaining industry while simultaneously meeting the Paris Agreement targets demands one thing: turning away from market fundamentalism and adopting industrial policy with an active and strategic role for the state (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2020; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023a, 2023g; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft,

2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023a; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a). Interviewee 1 refers to this most clearly when stressing the role of EU laws in this:

“We are still coming out of an era of market liberalism, which still directs the European institutions in a significant way based on the design of the common market and the competition and antitrust law and so on. The question is: Where is the EU? Where is Europe? Where is the European economic value added? If we are not able to undertake a state-led, an active design and implementation?”

Interviewee 1

While unions support market-based policies such as CO₂ pricing and taxes to disincentivise companies and consumers from environmentally harmful behaviours, the state is said to have to actively shape and support the change (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2016; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021, p. 55; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023f, 2023a).

“... it certainly needs political regulation in many areas and it’s on its way, for instance market incentives such as CO₂ prices but also limits... And it is necessary because without these ... interventions in market mechanisms little would have happened in the past 15 years... In that respect, it is ultimately a mix of political regulation on the one hand and investment expansion on the other hand of course also.”

Interviewee 1

Both union documents and our interviewees recurrently make reference to four main levers in climate policy that they emphasize as elements for reconciling ecological and social goals:

1. Massive public investments into infrastructure, renewable energies and decarbonisation technologies,

2. Social, employment-related and environmental requirements linked to any public investment or state support,
3. Governmentally supported and subsidised training and re-training initiatives and programmes to ease the current shortage of qualified workers, and
4. Easing of planning and approval procedures to accelerate the expansion of renewable energy projects.

As new technologies needed for decarbonisation are currently not profitable, unions argue that the market alone is unlikely to initiate change. In addition to public investments in energy, transport, and housing infrastructure, they maintain that the state should financially support the development and implementation of alternative production technologies, whether those may relate to cars, steel, chemicals or energy (Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022a; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie et al., 2022; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023e, 2023a; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, NABU and BUND, 2023). One policy tool to do this are carbon contracts for difference (Klimaschutzverträge), giving companies planning security while potentially redirecting revenues to the federal state (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023e; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2023). Another, more fundamental task that they consider crucial for achieving this state-driven and -financed transformation is a reform of both Germany’s constitutional ‘debt brake’ and EU state aid rules. In unionists’ view, these two laws effectively bar government from taking the more active role that it will have to play in order to successfully shape the transformation and successfully support firms (dpa, 2023; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2024b, 2024c).

Second, unions call for any such support to be mandatorily tied to its receivers fulfilling environmental, social and employment requirements

(Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023a, 2023c; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023a; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a). Bolstered by the success of the US Inflation Reduction Act, German unions have doubled down on their demand to make collective bargaining a requirement for state support (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023g). Guarantees by employers that employment and production will remain for certain periods of time is another requirement that unions demand to be included in financial state support.



The third key policy lever for unions is the training and re-training of qualified workers. Ultimately, decarbonising the economy – whether implementing heat pumps in homes, producing and maintaining electric cars, manufacturing, operating and repairing trains and buses, building and sustaining renewable energy parks, refurbishing buildings to meet energy efficiency standards, or re-foresting mixed woodlands – hinges on the ability to meet demand for skilled workers (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021, p. 55; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2022b; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2023; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023e, 2023a, 2023d; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a).

“We currently have a department which focuses on qualified workers because we see that this is the bottleneck. Maybe the whole climate transformation stands or falls with qualified workers, well, the absence of not only qualified workers but workers in general.”

Interviewee 6

“Qualifications, qualifications, qualifications.”

Interviewee 12

A major focus for unions in Germany is thus on training and re-qualification measures. One tool to guarantee adequate time and resources for training is the use of collective bargaining agreements to commit employers to granting workers the right to reduced working hours in order to participate in formal training that aims at securing employability (Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, 2023). These types of agreements are in some cases labelled “transformation short-time work” (Transformationskurzarbeitergeld) (Ahr, 2019; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2019, 2024) or qualification schemes (“Qualifizierungsgeld”) (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2024a; Räder and Pusch, 2024). In addition to providing for the time and costs of re-training, further efforts are necessary to make transitions attractive and interesting, according to some of the interview participants.

Fourth, maintaining industrial production requires access to sufficient and affordable clean energy. To boost the still-lacking expansion of renewable energy projects, unions are advocating for de-bureaucratisation and easing of planning and authorization procedures (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2021; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023a; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2023). The importance of the topic of energy, particularly electricity, becomes apparent by the sheer number of position papers and demands centred on the German electricity market. Especially since the onset of the energy crisis in the wake of Russia's attack on Ukraine, unions have argued that low electricity prices, guaranteed through a special price for industrial firms (Brückenstrompreis) or tax breaks, are absolutely necessary for German industry to remain competitive in Europe and globally (Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, 2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023e; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023b).

Relating to this point and going hand-in-hand with the overarching framework of combining social and ecological aspects is the perceived need to increase public acceptance for the rapid expansion of renewable energies and the transformation in general. Unions advocate for the aforementioned support for (re-)training initiatives, a "Klimageld" (climate allowance) that reimburses lower-income households for the increased costs from higher CO₂-prices or taxes – although this was not uncontested among our interviewees – and in some instances more direct participation of communities in renewable energy projects in the form of lower energy prices and financial benefits. More crucially, forms of good work that include higher pay, more direct participation and secure working conditions are seen as key for people's and workers' acceptance of the transformation and measures needed to tackle climate change (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2020; Industriegewerkschaft Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, 2020a; Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft,

2022a; Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2023d; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023b; Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023a).

3.2 Just Transition debates and activities

Support for re-training initiatives, financial compensation, more direct participation and an emphasis on co-determination already give away some of the instruments that labour unions are intending to use to make this transition towards climate neutrality just. In the following, we take a closer, more analytical look at how German unions' views and activities relate to the concept of a 'just transition' (JT) as discussed in international union discourse as well as in the literature. To draw this out in its different dimensions, we build on the analytical framework proposed by Stevis and Felli (2020), which uses three criteria to analyse and categorise the justice implications of different JT approaches: scale, scope and depth.

Before turning to the analytical discussion of JT policies, we asked interview participants about the term 'just transition': are they familiar with it? Do they use it? Do they prefer other terms?

3.2.1 'Just transition', 'social ecological transformation', 'Change' or 'Wandel'?

The term 'just transition' is well known among labour actors in Germany, but not exactly part of their everyday vocabulary. Although all but two interviewees had heard of the concept before, the majority of them noted that they rarely use the notion 'just transition' in communication within their unions or with workers. Several interviewees stated that they perceived it as more of a political phrase, as it leaves a lot of room for different interpretations:

"... a popular buzzword, because everyone can take it to mean all sorts of things. When I don't want to describe something very concretely, then I use this umbrella term."

Interviewee 5

“In politics this is of course, particularly in conversation with the green Economy Ministry [BMWK], a buzzword that one uses or ... on the European level.”

Interviewee 9

Another interviewee said that some colleagues argued they cannot use an English term when communicating with their members, and yet another thought that ‘just transition’ is simply not concrete enough for conversations with members and workers.

All interviewees said that they more commonly use the term ‘transformation’, often, but not always, in combination with the prefix ‘social-ecological’ as distinguished from ‘digital’. Other expressions are ‘FairWandel’ (IG Metall) or ‘just change’ (in German „gerechte Veränderung“) (ver.di). Nevertheless, some also differentiated between ‘just transition’ and ‘social-ecological transformation’. To interviewee 3, for instance, the latter describes “both the process and the goal” whereas the former “has an emphasis that this transition has to be designed in a just way”. To this union official, just transition describes some procedural and processual justice dimensions within a transformation towards a more socially and ecologically sustainable future. Similarly, interviewee 19 described social-ecological transformation as a less concrete term used by politicians and board members, whereas a “just restructuring process” is what they use on the ground to describe the actual process taking place. Interviewee 11 phrased it similarly in the following way:

“And the Germans always think transformation so much from the end. How everything will be at some point. And this term ‘Just Transition’ states: “Shit, we live right in the middle of it.”

Importantly, to many interviewees this transition or transformation process includes more than climate change and climate mitigation. The umbrella terms “transformation” or “FairWandel” commonly also refer to digitalisation and demographic change. In short, they present the way towards

climate neutrality as one of at least three ongoing transformative processes that need to be designed in a just or fair way. In contrast to this, in official union documents ‘just transition’ only referred to climate change. For instance, in motions to the DGB congress, ‘just transition’ appeared the first time in 2018 as a strategic approach to ensuring that the changes resulting from decarbonising the economy “will be shaped in a socially just manner from the perspective of working people” (DGB 2018, C011, p. 1), featuring in various climate policy proposals. However, at the next congress in 2022 “the notion of ‘just transition’, central as it had been four years earlier, had all but disappeared from the policy language, except for mentions of the EU’s Just Transition Fund and the Just Transition Centre” (Trappmann, Eversberg and Schulz, 2024).

To conclude, while the notion ‘just transition’ did feature prominently in DGB discourse for a brief moment, referring to efforts to ensure that climate policy is implemented in a socially just manner, it has since once more been relegated to being seen as a broader political concern at the international level. ‘Transformation’ or ‘Wandel’ (change) have become part of the everyday vocabulary used to describe ongoing processes of change that require union involvement, including but not limited to the climate crisis. On the one hand, it appears to be “incoherent” to criticise the term ‘just transition’ for its lack of concreteness, when instead using ‘transformation’ as an umbrella term that refers to climate change, digitalisation and demographic change. On the other hand, using ‘just transition’ as a notion for more overarching political conversations at the European and international level allows labour unions in Germany to focus on the concrete problem-solving processes related to each element of the ‘transformation’ at the regional and national level and, as such, their core sphere of influence.

In the interviews underlying the following analysis, interviewees used the terms “just transition” or “transformation” largely interchangeably when describing what the term means to them, depending on which term they were more familiar with in their everyday work.

3.2.2 Scale

Scale refers to both spatial and temporal dimensions. Does a proposal for instance focus only on a particular region within a country (narrow), a country, blocks of countries (broader) or does it take a global perspective (broad)? Temporality focuses on the inclusion of longer-term historical context and future consequences.

“We can look at the workplace, where we start small and can say that, if we change power trains and components [in cars], then no one may lose a pay scale... We can go bigger and look at the topic at the national level to see if things turn out just. But lastly, – and the question of global warming and global change presses one [to do so] – one has to look at it to some extent globally ...”

Interviewee 21

As this example quote captures, labour unionists in Germany approach the topic of transformational change at different scales ranging from the workplace to the international level. Each scale has its own justice implications as well as actors, instruments and tools to implement a version of a just transition or transformation. Despite the awareness for justice at different scales, some levels feature more prominently in strategies and demands than others. Most participants describe the need for European and global action.

“I see it [the transformation/transition] as a global orientation, because the topic transformation and climate mitigation is not one that is limited to Germany or Europe, but that should be addressed globally on a political and union level”.

Interviewee 18

Interviewees draw on different reasons and underlying justice principles to argue in favour of a globally scaled transition. To some participants, universalist egalitarian justice principles that include everyone to the same degree and allow for universal rights form the basis of global justice claims:

“There are around 8 billion people who live on Earth... How do we achieve that these 8 billion people will have a halfway decent life also in the future?”

Interviewee 21

“So, just transition can only mean that everyone will be taken on board. From a broad perspective, this applies also internationally.”

Interviewee 3

However, interviewee 21 is the only one who explicitly relates living conditions abroad to lifestyles and economic activities in Germany, Europe or the Global North, in stating that “one has to look at it to some extent globally, this topic of justice, where it is about adhering to good living conditions and basic human rights, which are also violated by our ways of living”.

To other union officials, global justice concerns are not motivated by universalist principles, but by equity considerations focused on current climate mitigation inputs and expected future outcomes. Their fear is that if only Germany implements strict climate regulation (inputs), their union’s constituents will lose their jobs (outcomes) because firms will relocate to other countries with less stringent regulation, benefitting workers there. In other words, this group draws on the common argument about ‘carbon leakage’, which from an equity point of view is seen as unfair. Equity here is, however, not defined in universalist terms, but on the basis of given economic and ecological imbalances and unequal technological endowments that are considered justified or at least accepted as factually legitimate.

“Part of this is that this [decarbonisation] not only happens in Germany, but at least in Europe and actually globally. So, the fairness [is], that not only our employees are affected”

Interviewee 9

“From our perspective it is not positive when [a transformation] leads to a systematic reduction in industrial employment and that potentially in other countries where climate regulation is less strict, production capacity will be increased. This will neither help the employees here nor climate mitigation.”

Interviewee 17

Two other important aspects merit further consideration. First, there is clearly an awareness that the mammoth task of fighting climate change, of mitigating its devastating consequences, can only be successfully performed through global collaboration and action. Yet, and second, as Stevis and Felli (2020) emphasise in the notion of scale, justice claims cannot be detached from spatial and temporal contexts. Stressing only the burdens that climate action puts on German workers, and marking them as unjust without further context, omits and disregards both the historical contributions to global greenhouse gas emissions from rich countries like Germany and the persistent flow of resources and wealth from the Global South to the Global North, often based on exploitative working conditions (Hickel, 2020; Hickel et al., 2022; Urban, 2024).

Official union proposals, mostly articulated through the DGB, attempt to incorporate both universalist and current equity-based justice considerations. On the one hand, they for instance advocate for the introduction of the Supply Chain Act (Lieferkettensorgfaltspflichtengesetz), which places responsibility on German companies for adhering to human rights standards along their entire supply chain. In this debate the DGB vocally insisted that higher costs for employers cannot and must not be used as an argument against better working and living conditions (DGB, 2024b). On the other hand, the DGB voices its support for an EU carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), which would, if implemented accordingly, reduce the risk of carbon leakage and improve competitiveness of Germany's industry and thus jobs (DGB, 2024; IG BCE, 2023).

Despite these international considerations, German

labour unions' main focus in terms of scale is the national level.

“... our immediate sphere of activity is restricted to ... Germany.”

Interviewee 20

“... we always also keep an eye on the international level and bring this up. But ... the emphasis of our work is here on ... Germany.”

Interviewee 3

The reason, as interviewee 20 states clearest, is an assessment of where the power resources unions possess are most effectively invested:

“And our resources do not seriously allow us to engage in a European or global project. ... For this we lack the [necessary] societal power to enforce.”

As such, in most instances, German unions leave this level to their “European and international umbrella organisations” (Interviewee 3). Given the structure of German industrial relations, the more prominent focus within the unions' field of influence and responsibility is along workplace, regional and national lines. As described in chapter 2, through works councils or advisory board representation, organised labour can exercise power at the workplace and organisational level, while collective bargaining agreements have the potential to influence work processes and outcomes at the sectoral and regional level. Additionally, the workplace is the most concrete and tangible scale at which to address justice implications resulting from the transition towards a climate neutral economy in a way that matters to union members.

At the same time, union officials take into account the regional embeddedness of workplaces or organisations and their supply chains (Interviewee 17). This aspect applies predominantly to industrial labour unions, for instance in the automotive or coal sector, with supply chain networks within Germany. ‘Justice’ in this sense relates to the ability of whole

regions that are affected by transformative processes to continue to offer employment as a means to make a living and guarantee a smooth transition.

“Ideally in the regions, where [jobs, economic activity] are being cut. In a way coordination and synchronisation of the areas that are being reduced and those areas that are growing.”

Interviewee 19

Ultimately, for most union officials, particularly in relation to their own position, just transition or transformation considerations are primarily directed at the national scale. Their primary concern is with workers in Germany, whether in industrial jobs, mining, transport or care work, not being left behind in the transition towards a carbon neutral future. As outlined above in 3.1., to unions, German climate policy must engage more with the social and employment implications for workers in Germany.

3.2.3 Scope: who is included?

Scope denotes the social and ecological inclusiveness of a JT. Do JT proposals only focus on workers in the coal industry (narrow) or are they more far-reaching, including all fossil fuel workers as well as those in renewable energies (broad)? Do they only focus on the workers affected (narrow) or also on the communities these workers are embedded in (broader)? Are only those workers that are affected at home targeted (narrow) or are those along the supply chain included in consideration (broader)? Importantly, are only those workers targeted who are negatively affected or do proposals ‘also include those most powerful and responsible for the policies and practices’ (Stavis and Felli, 2020, p. 4)?

When asked in the abstract, many, but not all interviewees described a broad scope that targets “not only industry, but the [whole] economy” (Interviewee 19), including “those ... in care work” (Interviewee 21) and that made sure that “everyone is included” (Interviewee 3), “people ... our members, but not only our members” (Interviewee 6). Despite this broad general justice

scope expressed in principle, on a more practical level there is an emphasis on those workers that are directly and negatively affected by the transition towards a net zero future. In line with their policy proposals described in chapter 3.1 above, to unions, ‘just’ means supporting those at risk of losing their jobs due to “changing production and economic processes” (Interviewee 4).

“... for us the social dimension [of the transformation] means that in restructuring and change processes, which are the result of the ecological transformation, people will be able to deal with it through a sense of security, that no job will be lost, that there is a job guarantee in these processes, so that they can go into these processes with a sense of security.”

Interviewee 23

One union initiative to support this is the call for the aforementioned “transformation short time work scheme” that supports workers in the transition by allowing them to learn new skills while continuing to be employed. Unions’ calls for this, dating back to 2019 (Ahr, 2019), were turned into an official federal policy instrument (Qualifizierungsgeld) implemented on April 1st 2024. Employees whose job will become obsolete in the transformation receive 60 per cent of their net pay while pursuing re-training/qualification programmes that will allow them to remain within the same company. This important instrument is broad in its JT scope as it does not differentiate between groups of workers, but targets all of those that in some way are affected by transformative processes.

In many instances, affected workers are not viewed in isolation but as embedded in regional structures. Interviewee 5 described two groups that need to be supported: those employees that are directly affected, but also those people that are indirectly dependent “because they live there”. With this understanding in mind, unions are advocating and actively pursuing moderated and planned structural change (Strukturwandel) in regions that are most affected due to their industrial and economic

composition (Interviewee 8). The DGB's project "Revierwende", which aims to give workers and unions in Germany's remaining four coal regions a voice to actively influence the change away from coal towards new economic and employment activity (Revierwende, 2023), based on principles of good work, is a good example of this regional target scope (Interviewee 2).

Another union led initiative to moderate and shape structural changes at the regional level are regional transformation councils (Transformationsräte) (Moch, 2022). These regional councils include labour unions, industry associations, civil society organisations as well as regional political stakeholders such as the municipalities and employment agencies to co-develop transformational strategies and concepts for the region (Hoßbach, 2023, 2024). As of 2024 such regional transformation councils were reported to exist in 37 per cent of Germany's regions (Hoßbach, 2024). Unions' continued call for and participation in these councils together with other stakeholders underline, once more, the corporatist approach to the transformation/transition in Germany. It also demonstrates a core focus on regional structural change beyond immediate relief packages for particularly affected workers.

3.2.4 Depth

Lastly, JT approaches can be both broad in scope and scale, yet they might lack depth. Depth here discusses how far-reaching or how deeply transformative the proposals are in trying to change the underlying structures and addressing systemic issues.

"We are not the revolutionary subject I hoped we would be."

Interviewee 4

The above quote characterises in a nutshell labour unions' positions on the depth of a just transition. To unions, as interviewee 20 remarked, criticising the overarching capitalist forms of labour relations and private ownership or the inherent growth imperative of capital does not come naturally. The climate

policy proposals and the debates surrounding them as described in chapter 3.1 underline this. The focus is on strengthening worker rights, working conditions and labour organizations under the given conditions of the current model of capitalist labour relations. If and where a deeper change to the status quo is called for, the emphasis of this is on reinstating social welfare state capitalist models, wherein workers participated in and received a fair share of the growing economic pie.

A five-day seminar offered for union members and works councillors by the IG Metall education centre in Beverungen on "alternatives to economic growth" highlights that a more serious engagement with fundamental systemic questions may be starting to develop. Nevertheless, only few interviewees voiced the radical critique of economic growth models but argue for a more sustainable and democratic mode of 'qualitative growth':

"We are aware that there are areas that will need to shrink where this is the case... [But] when it comes to questioning growth per se, that is something we would have a hard time with."

Interviewee 17

"Our vision is one of qualitative growth..."

Interviewee 2

To achieve this 'qualitative growth' – a term that has been present in German union and social democratic discourse for half a century (Loderer, 1977; Simonis, 1980) – labour unions are demanding a shift away from market-centred forms of coordination and toward a model of state-driven ecological modernisation. Unions are clear about the need to transfer and relocate workers from receding occupations and sectors into new, "green" ones through training and compensation mechanisms. At the same time, this transformation is routinely interpreted within a 'win-win' frame and presented as an opportunity for industry to become a leader in green technologies, thereby securing growth and employment.

“How can we maintain employment? What are alternative products, production processes? How can we make this location future proof?”

Interviewee 1

It is here that unions strongly advocate for more state involvement to financially support firms in the transition process, through investments in infrastructure, R&D, subsidies, carbon-contracts-for-difference, simplified planning and building procedures and more public administration personnel to accelerate approval procedures. Many interviewees were conscious of the resource use associated with “green” technologies and the need for drastic reduction of throughput. Yet, several of them voiced optimism that with efficiency improvements and greater circularity resources reduction could be delivered (Int 6, Int 13, Int 18). Except for interviewee 19, our union interview partners did not perceive climate change as a fundamental crisis of capitalism, nor as a challenge to the given mode of living, as IG Metall Board member Urban (2024) stresses. The depth of just transition is not understood as systemically transformative, but rather as replacing the dominance of markets in driving innovation and growth with that of the state.

“We need an incredible amount of investment to enable green production. And that’s not economical to begin with. And the thing is, if it works, then it can, then it’s competitive. And then it is also the case that when we produce green, that also sends a signal.”

Interviewee 6

“The liberal way of thinking ‘The market will sort it out’ or ‘the market can do it better’ was clearly in focus for a while. That just didn’t work out.”

Interviewee 5

Only a few interviewees voiced more radical considerations, such as converting production facilities:

“Well, those companies that build combustion engines and fossil technologies, those will then build regenerative or future technologies. So, technologies for the energy and mobility transformation, electric cars, heat pumps, wind turbines, PV-plants, electrolysis. There are many technologies and products, particularly industrial products, which enable a more efficient human use of energy and that these products will lead to secure and value-added employment in this country”

Interviewee 19

There are several joint initiatives at the workplace level in which works councils and unionists are pushing discussion about converting manufacturing that is likely to become obsolete. One example is the German production site of automotive supplier Federal-Mogul in Wiesbaden, which specialises in a particular part for combustion engines. Due to the foreseeable decline of demand for combustion engine parts in the transition to electric vehicles, management plans to shut down the site. The IG Metall supports an initiative by employees and works councils to develop alternative products that could be produced utilising the current production facilities and the employees’ know-how, in an effort to avoid the plant closure (Böckmann, 2023). There will clearly be ample scope for such debates as significant swathes of the automotive and other ‘fossil’ industries in Germany will be confronted with radical shifts in demand for their products, and would be well advised to consider alternative production options early. However, recent examples such as the attempt to avert closure of a Bosch production site in Munich suggest that conversion may be a good pivot for alliances with climate activists, but extremely hard to rally workers around, at least for the time being (Kaiser, 2023; Ziegler, 2023).

Next to concretely supporting those affected, to our union interviewees a core element of a just transition or transformation was the empowerment of workers through more direct participation and codetermination. As Interviewee 21 puts it, it is about expanding democracy at the workplace and company level because “it cannot be the case

that companies decide what this just transition way looks like” (Interviewee 19). As Interviewee 2 already highlighted for workers and people in the coal regions, unions’ creed is that employees should not only be heard but need to be in a position to actively codetermine this transformation process. Improving and increasing possibilities for worker democracy is portrayed as vital for the success of the transformation process because:

“Only if we are in a position to codetermine, can we ask this question [what exactly the future should look like] ... And I notice when I talk to employees that the first step needs to be that you are capable of acting, you are not powerless, you can participate, you can change something... And then there will be an argument about: is this actually good if we build electric cars or not, or whatever.”

Interviewee 19

In 2022, the DGB published a proposal for a draft bill to reform the Works Constitution Act (Betriebsverfassungsgesetz), which aimed to address the “biggest challenges of our times”, among them the social-ecological transformation (Allgaier et al., 2022). The bill includes codetermination for environmental protection and climate change mitigation measures that would allow works councils to influence decisions on the choice between environmentally friendly or harmful production. The authors of the bill also call for the establishment of an environmental committee in any workplace with more than 100 employees. This broad proposal would affect all workers in Germany and could achieve significant transformative depth by meaningfully increasing the power of workers and their representatives. Were such codetermination rights in effect, the discussions on converting production in firms like Federal Mogul could certainly appear less utopian and more worthy of active support to workers.

While there is overall support among union officials for empowering workers through strengthened codetermination, only some interviewees also explicitly talk about a need to directly challenge

those in positions of power as a condition for justice in transformation processes. Interviewees 19, 20 and 23 address the profit motive as a crucial issue that is detrimental to humans and nature. They reason that the goal of the “capital fraction” (interviewee 19) is to transform and adapt to changing circumstances in a way that above all preserves their profits, even if that amounts to loss of jobs in Germany. For this reason, to interviewee 20, labour unions need to dare to challenge capital’s power and capitalist interests, even if “this does not come naturally to unions [in Germany]”. Interviewee 23 gets more concrete by highlighting the problematic role of financial investors and their expectations of returns on investment either through dividends or share price increases from share buybacks. By focusing on pleasing investors, “capital is being destroyed that could otherwise have been invested in the climate neutral restructuring of the company” (interviewee 23).

Other interviewees do not directly voice such challenges to power structures or capitalist labour relations. What they do unanimously criticise is the level of economic inequality in Germany. On the one hand, tackling persistent and growing inequalities is seen as important to increase acceptance for the transformation so that “people do not feel that they are part of the ones that are being left behind” (Interviewee 13). To some union officials this also implies that if a transition is to be just, the more well-off must contribute more to the efforts, for instance through a wealth tax that will result in more government revenues (interviewee 1). Interviewee 17 argues that economic inequality should be addressed from two sides. To this union official, by transferring some power from capital owners to workers, codetermination has the potential to let employees be part of the company’s financial success. Yet, to curb the influence of wealthy individuals and groups in the democratic processes, interviewee 17 posits that it is important to introduce a progressive wealth tax.



3.3 Contested aspects of climate action and Just Transition within the labour movement

While trade unions in Germany generally demonstrate overall cohesion in their climate political stances through the DGB, there are some differences between unions. Most of these differences arise from the differing sectoral backgrounds and corresponding divergences in workers' interests relating to the changes at hand. These in turn feed into different approaches to the practical challenge of balancing short-term concrete goals (protecting jobs and working conditions) and long-term societal goals (ecological sustainability and net zero emissions).

For instance, unions generally agree that overall individual motorised traffic will need to decrease in order to meet climate targets (Bündnis Sozialverträgliche Mobilitätswende, 2022, 2024). Even IG Metall, the union representing automotive workers, in principle supports this position and has signed declarations to this effect, even in cooperation with environmental protection organisations (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023c; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, NABU and BUND, 2023). Yet, interpretations of what exactly this statement amounts to vary, and the degree to which individual motorised traffic should decrease to the benefit of other forms of mobility is gauged quite differently across the unions. Not surprisingly, ver.di and the railway union EVG advocate for an

accelerated and intensified transition to public transport and railways. There is also more of an awareness among them that merely switching from combustion engines to fully electric vehicles will not be the solution to emissions from traffic due to production-related and afterlife emissions.

Interviewees from IG Metall also articulated an understanding for this position. However, they went on to argue that the transition from combustion engines to fully electric cars is in itself perceived as an enormous challenge by their members. The significant reduction in parts required for an electric engine and drive train has severe consequences particularly for specialised small and medium-sized firms in the automobile supply chain. Managing even this change fairly from a workers' point of view requires significant efforts at developing and implementing concrete plans for restructuring, retraining and sometimes relocation of workers to avoid job losses, in addition to convincing workers that they're still advocating for their interests.

In light of these difficulties, which similarly apply to other fields, industrial unionists (and even some from ver.di) sometimes express frustration about ver.di ostentatiously entering an alliance with Fridays for Future, a movement that has been calling for an overall shrinking of the German automobile industry, and in some cases of Germany as an industrialized economy overall (Fridays for Future, 2020). On the other hand, both IG BCE

and IG Metall have themselves increasingly been in dialogue and publishing joint position papers with the more moderate environmental NGOs (Bündnis Sozialverträgliche Mobilitätswende, 2022; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie et al., 2022; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, NABU and BUND, 2023; ADFC et al., 2024; Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, Deutscher Naturschutzring and WWF, 2024), working to establish common ground and advocate for shared proposals and visions. That is, the tension is not about cooperating with environmentalists per se, but about whether unions are willing to tolerate partners questioning Germany's industrial model or economic growth as a policy aim – positions that industrial unionists feel will alienate their members.

This line of tension between the industrial unions on the one and ver.di in particular on the other hand also became apparent in the debate on a discounted electricity price for energy-intensive industrial companies following the onset of an 'energy crisis' sparked by Russia's attack on Ukraine. While industrial unions campaigned for this temporary subsidy, which they saw as necessary for maintaining competitiveness and retaining jobs and relatively 'clean' production sites in Germany (Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau Chemie Energie, 2023; Industriegewerkschaft Metall, 2023d, 2023a), in an interview ver.di's chairperson Frank Werneke argued against the presented proposal (Kammer and dpa, 2023). He was not categorically opposed, but argued that spending enormous sums to subsidize cheap energy for large industrial corporations in times of high inflation while consumers would have to pay six to seven times the price would have the potential for social conflict. If such a subsidy was considered, he called for a much broader application that "for instance also includes social institutions and those in healthcare but also for private households" (Kammer and dpa, 2023).

This discussion on subsidised electricity prices exemplifies a broader issue of contention in German politics, resulting from the constitutional 'debt brake' and the Federal Constitutional Court's decision in

late 2023 that buttressed the regulation and judged previous government practices of sidestepping it to be illegal: an increasingly heated competition for the sharply limited supply of public money. In light of unions' state-driven eco-modernist approach to the climate crisis (Trappmann, Eversberg and Schulz, 2024) and its fundamental reliance on massive federal investments in infrastructure, industrial change processes, short-time work schemes and so on, the federal government's strict adherence to the 'debt brake' has in recent years come to pose a serious threat, particularly from a union point of view. In this context, the fact that every union has clear financial demands for their sectors and workers increasingly amounts to pitting them against each other. Interviewee 2 described these conflicts in the following way:

"I have just mentioned the different areas, be it subsidised industrial electricity prices or carbon-contracts for difference. One will need to use public money. And the debate goes a bit like: 'well, is it [the money] not missing later on for healthcare and the upgrading of care occupations, the equipment of schools and so on?' This is a bit of an upcoming, partly erupting conflict."

Arguments between unions thus do not originate from diametrically opposed views on how to tackle the climate crisis. Rather, it is triggered partly by different sector-specific interests and concerns that require unions to make strategic compromises, and to another part by an artificially created limit on government spending that unions, along with several political parties, have long rejected, but could not convince sufficient parliamentary majorities to alter or abolish. Once resources – here the need for public funds – are scarce, there is a "competitive situation, a rivalry" (Interviewee 2) among unions for the limited availability of public resources. After the parliamentary election in February 2025 the most likely incoming Conservative-Social Democratic coalition has bowed to the overwhelming pressure to increase spending, primarily due to drastically escalating geopolitical threats and the perceived need to ramp up military spending. However, as part of the compromise with the Greens, hundreds

of billions of Euros have also been committed to infrastructural investment and €100bn to top up the Climate Change and Transformation fund (Klima- und Transformationsfond). However, conservatives continue to categorically reject reforming the ‘debt brake’ itself, leaving the conflict merely partially suspended.

3.4 What does just transition mean in Germany?

The term ‘just transition’ is well-known among labour union officials, yet rarely used outside high level political conversations at the European level. In internal union conversations the term is mostly not seen as sufficiently concrete to describe the necessary changes. In dialogues with their members, interviewees consider the term both too abstract and view it as an anglicism that many workers do not understand. More often the participants used the term transformation or ‘Wandel’ (change), though rarely to refer to climate change and climate action alone. Instead, climate change and the need for societal change to fight it is typically bundled together with digitalisation and demographic changes into a broader panorama of ‘transformation’ – a framing that resonates with the experience of multiple compounding challenges faced by many at the company and workplace level, yet proposes an equivalence of these challenges that others may for good reasons view as problematic.

The justice claims that are made on a rhetorical level often have a global scale and broad scope, calling for inclusion of people and workers everywhere, also those indirectly affected by structural changes to regions. Yet despite these broad considerations, the actual focus of policies directed at implementing a Just Transition agenda is on the national and regional level for at least three reasons. First, most unions do not see themselves as having the resources to cover international issues. Second, their field of influence is mostly limited to the national and, to a lesser degree, the European level. In the existing division of labour,

international issues and influence at transnational levels are mostly delegated to the European and international umbrella organisations such as the ETUC, ITUC and IndustriAll. Third, in light of the historical decline in collective bargaining coverage and union membership, the primary focus lies on their members’ interests: secure employment and good working conditions in Germany. Unions have started to implement various initiatives to support these goals, ranging from direct support for converting production to avoid production site closures, successful lobbying for a short-time work scheme that will allow workers to remain with their employer and the establishment of and participation in regional transformation councils, to proposing a draft bill on reforming the Works Constitution Act to increase the power of works councils in decisions on environmentally-friendly production.

Unions in Germany, in particular industrial unions, have historically benefitted from Germany’s export-focused “fossil welfare state capitalism” (Urban, 2024). The advantages in the form of higher wages, lower working hours and social security, albeit under attack from the dominant neoliberal economic approach for several decades now, have fostered reluctance to challenging a capitalist welfare model. Despite some voices within the union movement having increasingly argued against this fixation in recent years (Urban 2018, 2020, 2024, Reuter 2014), critical engagement with fundamental issues of capitalist labour and property relations and their consequences, particularly for workers and nature in the Global South, plays, if at all, a subordinate role in just transition strategies and discourses. In line with this, labour unions’ dominant approach to overcoming current crises continues to be, as Trappmann et al. (2024) label it, a state-driven eco-modernisation approach: shifting some of the power from capital to unions and the state, but without more fundamentally touching on relations of production and capitalism’s expansionary imperatives as the source of both labour exploitation and environmental destruction.

A photograph of three workers in a control room or office. They are wearing white hard hats and high-visibility safety vests. They are gathered around a large computer monitor that displays a complex technical diagram with various boxes and connecting lines. The man in the center is pointing at the screen with his right hand. The woman on the right is looking at the screen with a focused expression. The background shows a blurred industrial or office setting with a grid-like ceiling structure.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As Europe's largest economy and its biggest contributor to territorial CO₂ emissions, a successful decarbonisation process in line with just transition principles would have an important signalling effect for other countries in Europe and around the globe.

Yet, as we outlined in the early chapters of this report, Germany’s self-proclaimed image as a climate policy forerunner currently does not hold up. The watering down of agreed sectoral emission reduction targets in the latest amendment of the Climate Change Act, the rise of the climate-sceptical far-right Alternative für Deutschland, tactical pandering to change-weary voters among conservative and liberal parties, a constitutionally enshrined balanced budget requirement that hinders the urgently required investments in infrastructure, green technologies and social cohesion, and in some cases obstruction by powerful industrial lobby organisations all currently impede the necessary implementation of transitional policies that would put Germany on a robust and socially just track towards net zero.

As part of the country’s tradition of corporatist deal-making and crisis management, German unions wield significant influence in climate politics. Through collective bargaining agreements and codetermination in the form of works councils and seats of advisory boards, labour unions’ primary fields of influence in this transformative process are predominantly at the organisational and sectoral level. Yet, both formal and informal consultation processes also make them powerful actors at the national policymaking level.

Germany’s still strongly export-driven, highly industrialized economic model can be seen as both blessing and curse. As elsewhere, production and manufacturing sectors tend to be more strongly unionised, with stable, well-paid jobs characterised by high levels of codetermination. Simultaneously, these well-organized sectors account for the highest shares of CO₂ emissions and are most urgently in need of a transformation, putting the livelihoods of employees in these sectors at risk if not accompanied by targeted labour market policy responses. Insufficient responses and investments into the ecological transformation of German industry and the energy system have started to materialise. Four out of ten companies intend to cut jobs in 2025 and beyond, including tens of thousands industry jobs (Grömling, 2024). This is

the dilemma labour unions are confronted with: how to protect their members while also fulfilling their goals of being a social movement with overarching responsibilities of ecological responsibility and social justice?

The analysis of archival union documents – positions papers, commentaries on parliamentary bill proposals and press releases – and interviews with 25 union actors from the DGB member unions as well as works councils indicated a clear predominance of an approach to climate and just transition policy that can be categorised as state-driven eco-modernisation. State-driven eco-modernisation entails a critique of narrowly profit-oriented corporate strategies and ‘market fundamentalist’ policies that are seen as unable to deliver the investments and policy changes necessary for reaching climate targets and improving socio-economic conditions in Germany. Against this, unions advocate for a more active and strategically involved state that invests massively in the required infrastructures, financially supports firms in the transformation towards ‘green’ production processes and workers through subsidised training and qualification programmes to help them transition into jobs in the new ‘green’ industries or within the transformed workplaces. By demanding to tie government subsidies, grants and tenders to social and employment requirements such as adherence to collective agreements and employer guarantees to maintain production in Germany, this transformation policy can also be classified as an attempt at union renewal.

The establishment of regional transformation councils (Transformationsräte) and the implementation of the “Qualifizierungsgeld” are two examples that underline German labour unions’ success in influencing policy making in line with their JT approaches. These initiatives are representative of the main scales of a just transition in Germany in line with labour unions’ main spheres of influence, which, while rhetorically always referring to the global dimensions of the climate crisis, are clearly grounded in their institutional set-up: the sectoral-regional and workplace levels.



It is here where they can take advantage of their strong institutionalised position within Germany's corporatist system to moderate and influence the transformational processes.

Importantly, many of the union officials we interviewed articulated views open to more comprehensive and transformational societal change than those found in their respective union's official position papers. Whereas only a few articulated an outright critique of capitalism and of current power relations, most did state global justice considerations that go beyond national borders and call for inclusion of workers in all countries. Although indeed in line with the DGB's self-understanding as enshrined in its basic programme (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 1996), such an articulation of global justice does however rarely, if ever, feature in official position papers in relation to climate policy or the socio-ecological transformation, or become the guideline of actual policies.

At a time when far-right nationalist parties have established a foothold, also among union members,

by playing on people's fears of socioeconomic decline, it might feel hard for labour unions to convince their members of the value of solidarity with other workers around the globe. Additionally, the corporatist tradition that hands unions extraordinary institutionalised power, but at the same time compels them to strive for joint solutions with employer and industry associations through compromise, may induce them to shy away from stronger, more transformative demands that the situation increasingly calls for, but that would break with the corporatist arrangement and amount to openly challenging the power of the capital side. The adoption of a 'Realpolitik' approach might thus more accurately describe how German labour unions attempt to reap, in their eyes, the most tangible benefits for their members within the corporatist system in Germany. In light of the good process of coalition talks between the CDU/CSU and SPD at the time of writing, it is unlikely to expect labour unions to challenge employers and industry and to push for more progressive reforms.

The important question to ask is: “Will this be enough?” Critical voices from within, both from a few of our union interviewees and from IG Metall executive board member Hans-Jürgen Urban (Urban, 2018, 2020, 2024), argue that the current efforts and proposals may not be enough. The eco-modernisation approach hinges on the provision and consumption of natural resources such as lithium, nickel, graphite, cobalt, copper and neodymium (Energy Transitions Commission, 2023). In its current form the mining, production and provision of these resources are problematic in at least three ways. First, the process is based on exploitative labour relations and the destruction of natural environments and eco-systems in the Global South (Vera et al., 2023; International Labour Organisation, 2024). Second, the mining of resources in less developed countries for export to richer countries in the Global North perpetuates unequal economic and ecological imbalances (Dorn, 2022; Hickel et al., 2022). Third, the competition for resources to decarbonise energy and mobility systems leads to a fragmentation of countries’ ability to decarbonise. Poorer nations should not only be the providers of cheap resources to countries like Germany. There needs to be improved benefit sharing so that “all countries, in particular developing countries, should have an equitable opportunity to harness technological innovation, participate in global mineral value chains and to benefit from these” (UN Secretary-General’s Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals, 2024, p. 13). The inability of these countries to benefit as well would leave them unable to follow a similar decarbonisation path to countries like Germany. This would go directly against labour unions’ call for tackling climate change, and the climate commitments globally, and is unlikely to achieve sufficient overall emission reductions.

To address this current blind spot, the global rhetoric of labour unions in Germany must translate into more concrete actions and proposals. While supporting the Supply Chain Act and a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, two necessary instruments with a global focus, they are insufficient to face global economic and ecological imbalances and the problem of unequal technological

endowments. More public awareness for and concrete actions against the exploitation of nature and labour from resource mining and production in the Global South for “green” technologies in rich countries of the Global North, such as Germany, are necessary. Unions’ commitment to ecological responsibility and social justice thus needs to extend to workers globally. Only then can there be global effort to reduce overall CO2 emissions.

And despite the worrying developments in Germany’s climate political landscape described in chapter 2, we see some positive changes that may support unions to develop more far reaching and deeper just transition proposals. First, after long years of continuous union membership decline, ver.di, Germany’s service workers’ union, recently witnessed a significant increase in new members after successful collective strike action, for instance in public services (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, 2023b). Further successes in labour disputes for better working conditions may continue to boost membership across unions, thereby increasing organisational power.

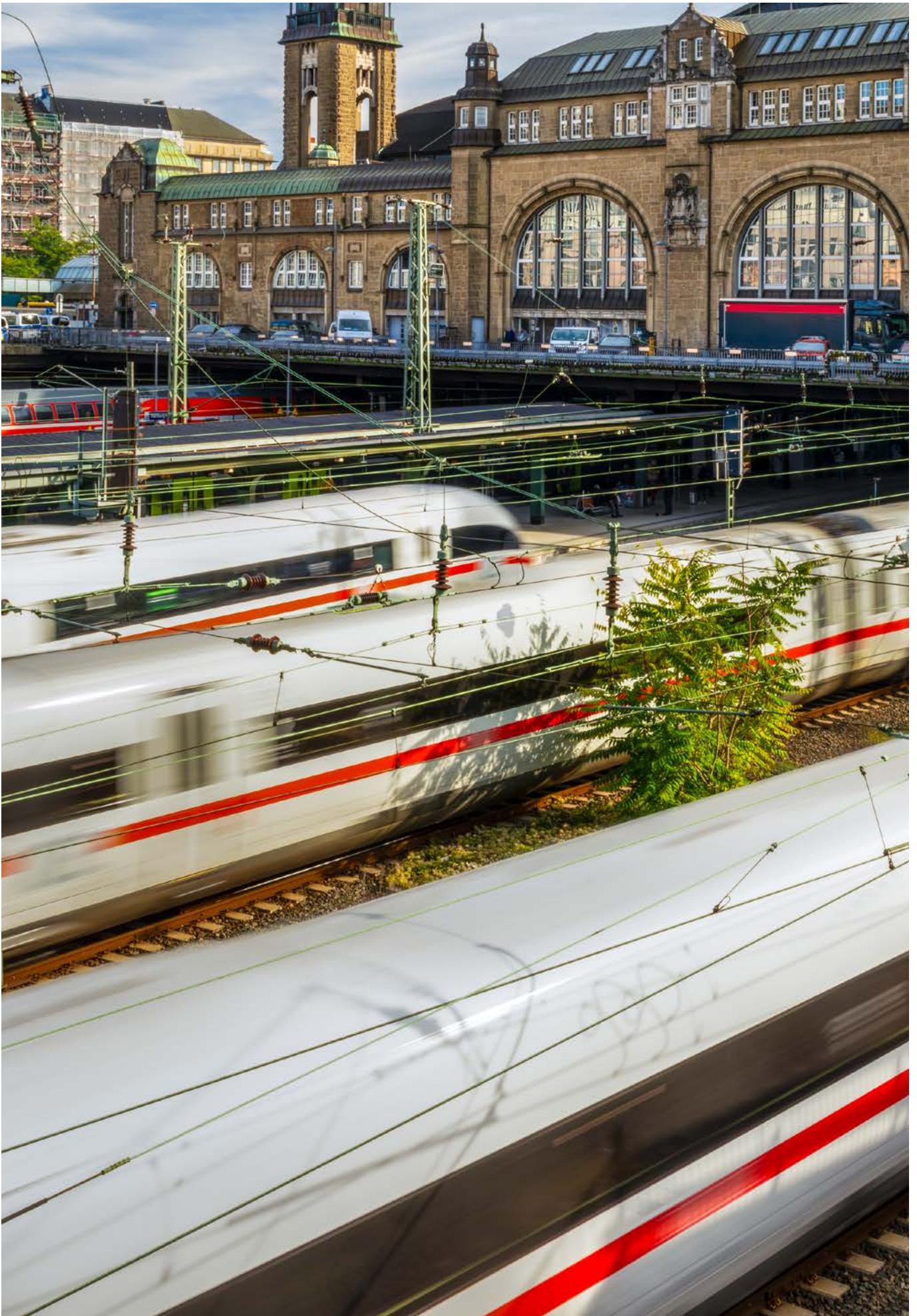


Second, over the past years the growing number of coalitions between all DGB member unions and environmental NGOs have fostered and nurtured collaboration and mutual understanding. Coalitions between environmental NGOs and the IG BCE, which to some may have seemed unthinkable a decade ago, exemplify the possibilities of “red-green” alliances at structurally difficult intersections. Strengthening and expanding these alliances have the potential to translate into more political power needed to challenge other influential lobby groups, on the one hand, and developing continued mutual understanding and thereby support, on the other. With a new political reality forming after the 2025 snap election, such alliances may, however, be received with less open arms. Coalitions between labour unions and employer or industry association will have better chances of being heard.

Third, in line with previous research around discourses on future visions among members of the EU (Kallis, Mastini and Zografos, 2024) and German parliament (Rivera, 2018), our findings show that a low-key process of rethinking long-held stances and beliefs around growth and ecology is going on among German unionists engaged with issues of transformation (Trappmann, Eversberg and Schulz, 2025). Over time this process may feed into a shift in union climate politics beyond the current state-driven eco-modernisation approach, and a readiness for bolder initiatives within broader movement alliances. At the same time, this necessitates a concurrent shift among politicians, particularly, MPs and government ministers to have an open ear for such initiatives and alliances.

Fourth, by focusing on working people and their livelihoods, labour unions have been vital in broadening the focus of public debate on the climate crisis and establishing the point that it must be seen as both an ecological and a social issue. This has opened the door to deeper questions about who and in which ways the economy should serve.

Fifth and last, the renewed political interest and public support for a wealth tax in Germany (Boddenberg and dpa, 2024) might be the starting winds of change to challenge some of the power structures that impede the path for transformational change. The rhetoric of challenging powerful elites must not be an exclusive characteristic of new populist and far-right parties hijacking it for anti-transformative purposes and instrumentalising it for the interests of some of the most economically powerful. It must once again, as stipulated in the DGB 1996 Basic Programme (p. 2), become a trademark of labour unions, symbolising “a countervailing force against employer and capital power ... to overcome exploitation and oppression through solidarity”.



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This project focuses on studying **Just Transitions** by comparing concepts, policies, and strategies across 14 diverse countries to ensure a **socially just shift towards decarbonisation**. It aims to develop recommendations for climate-friendly structural changes that protect workers and vulnerable groups. The project is funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation – Just Transition: Aktivitäten im internationalen Vergleich 2021-582-2.

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