

UK Case Report Trades unions, climate policy and just transition in the UK.

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1. Introduction

The UK has sought to be a **global leader in climate agendas** and was one of the first countries to **legislate for climate targets that mandated emissions reduction targets.**

This report is based on evidence from 27 interviews with union officers and climate experts undertaken between Spring 2023 and Autumn 2024 (see Annex A for details) alongside a review of related government and union policy documents examines the role of UK unions in climate policy making and how just transition policy and practice has developed across the UK.

British trade unions have long been active in environmental debates and called for just transition policy and a more pro-active industrial policy that also protects and workers and communities from the negative effects of restructuring due to decarbonisation. While just transition continues to form part of the language of core TUC demands, some unions feel that not enough has been delivered by government or companies to make the term justified. It has not helped that UK unions are excluded from climate governance institutions and have felt the voice of workers is marginalised in UK climate policy. Given this exclusion, unions have experimented with new forms of representing workers interests and this report also noted innovations in workplace and place-based initiatives.

This report maps out the broader context of climate policies and policymaking in the UK more widely and then discusses how trade unions have variously framed worker interests in climate policy and the specific initiatives taken on the ground to support workers in the face of climate change policy. It concludes with a reflection on the scale, scope and depth and critically pace of UK just transition demands. The findings are explored in the report as follows: Section 2 focuses on climate policy and climate policy making and trade union engagement in these processes. Section 3 turns more specifically to the question of just transition by reviewing just transition debates and specific just transition initiatives. It concludes by assessing how just transition is interpreted in the UK, drawing on the framework proposed by Stevis and Felli (2020) as a tool to examine just transition in terms of the scope, scale and depth of transformation. A complementary policy brief, *Workers, trade unions and Just Transition in the UK*¹ (Trappmann et al, 2024) sets out the policy recommendations for government and unions arising from this report.

1 <https://justtransition.leeds.ac.uk/>





2. Climate Policy – UK Context and the role of labour

This section outlines the context within which UK unions are **seeking to advance climate policy.**

This section provides a broad view of the UK economy (2.1), UK climate emissions and progress in reducing them (2.2), the institutions that support climate policy-making (2.3) and the evolution of climate policy and specifically decarbonisation (2.4-2.5). After summarising the current industrial relations context (2.6), the section then looks at the role of UK unions within the climate policy arena (2.7), concluding that they have generally been on the periphery of policy formation and scrutiny. The final subsections of Section 2 outline the opportunities and constraints for union engagement in climate policy-making (2.8), the climate policy demands of UK unions (2.9) and the alliances formed with other stakeholders (2.10).

2.1 Key features of the UK Economy

UK climate policy making needs to be seen in the context of the wider political economy within which it has developed. The UK is considered a liberal market economy in which economic activity is primarily coordinated through market mechanisms and historically less reliance on coordinating non-market institutions of industrial relations, vocational training and governance (Hall and Soskice, 2001). This approach is reflected in climate policy-making, as we see below. The economy is dominated by the service sector, which contributes about 82 per cent of GDP output (House of Commons Library, 2023). Since the 1950s, the number of people working in manufacturing has fallen from around 1 in 3 to less than 1 in 10 (ONS, 2015; TUC, 2018). The decline of the UK manufacturing industry has been much sharper than in comparator countries (IMF Research Dept., 2018). As service sector work generates less in “exportable” products than manufacturing, Britain’s balance of payments has shifted leading to continuous trade deficits in its combined trade in goods and services since 1998 (Bickerton et al., 2018). It has likewise seen lower productivity growth than comparable countries for over a decade. A variety of explanations exist, including the ongoing economic restructuring towards tertiary sectors, the effects of withdrawal from the European Union and a weak training

system (Coffield et al., 2008; Bickerton et al., 2018; Government Office for Science, 2018; Benanav, 2020; Resolution Foundation, 2023).

Another key feature of the UK economy is its regional inequality. Social and economic prospects and productivity levels are lower in the North versus the South (Bickerton et al., 2018; McCann, 2020; Fransham et al., 2023). These already-disadvantaged areas include those that have already experienced ‘unjust’ transitions as the economy restructured in the last quarter of the twentieth century. These regions are potentially at further risk as the UK transitions to a greener economy. Energy-intensive manufacturing and fossil fuel production are concentrated in the North of England, South Wales and parts of Scotland, and decarbonisation could worsen pre-existing inequalities. There are four different legislatures and executives in the UK, each with a range of devolved powers to national bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each administration sets climate targets and has taken slightly different approaches to climate and transition policy-making that variously involves unions and environmental NGOs (ENGOs). Since 2009, there has also been an extension of devolution in England to ‘combined authorities’, legal bodies set up using national legislation enabling two or more local councils to take on limited devolved functions over transport, skills and economic policy. The following discussion of climate targets and policymaking focuses primarily on the UK-level but also notes where key differences to UK-wide approaches to targets and stakeholder engagement have emerged in the UK nations and regions.

2.2 UK climate emissions, targets and progress

While per capita emissions are now relatively low in the UK compared to many comparable nations, the UK and is one of the top 10 of global emitters historically. It has contributed around 3 per cent of the total temperature change seen between 1851 and 2021 (Jones et al., 2023). This historical

contribution has formed part of the narrative for the need for the UK to take a lead on climate action. A notable feature of which was the UK's early adoption of climate goals.

2.2.1 Targets

To address climate change, the Labour government (1997 to 2008) oversaw the introduction of the Climate Change Act in 2008. This was in part a response from the environmental lobby which had a notable success in 2005 with the 'Big Ask' campaign. Led by Friends of the Earth with support from civil society groups and unions, it helped build cross-party consensus for a Bill to make emissions reduction targets statutory. This resulted in the 2008 Climate Change Act or CCA (Carter, 2014). The CCA includes planning for emission reductions using carbon budgets to indicate a legally mandated 'allowance' of greenhouse gas emissions over successive five-year periods. Supporting policy followed in 2009 with the Low Carbon Transition Plan, indicating how 18 per cent of emissions cuts would be delivered by 2020 (HM Government, 2009). The CCA committed the UK to achieving an 80 per cent reduction in emissions in relation to the 1990 baseline by 2050 (Jones et al., 2023). The UK government has continued to commit to increasingly ambitious emissions reduction targets. In 2020, it committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 68 per cent in comparison to 1990 levels by 2030 and reaching net zero emissions by 2050 (HM Government, 2020). The target was increased the following year to a reduction of 78 per cent, to meet the CCC's recommendation for the UK's 6th carbon budget (Forster, 2021). Although Government climate plans were found to be unlawful against the provisions of the CCA for lacking sufficient detail and an over reliance on unproved technologies². As a result, even more ambitious interim climate actions were set by the Labour government elected in July 2024 for an 81% cut from 1990 levels by 2035, and 68% on 1990 levels by 2030 (Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, 2025a, UK Government 2025b): the first time UK government climate

targets were assessed as consistent with achieving Net Zero in 2050.

The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own statutory emissions reduction targets. Scotland intends to reach net zero emissions by the earlier date of 2045 and had set annual and interim targets of 75 per cent and 90 per cent reductions by 2030 and 2040 respectively. However, these milestones were scrapped in 2024 in recognition that they would not be met, although the 2035 target remained. In March 2021, the Senedd (the Welsh Parliament) increased its ambition and formally committed to net zero by 2050, 63 per cent by 2030 and 89 per cent by 2040 and convened a Wales NetZero 2035 Challenge group to outline a 10-year action plan that would move towards decarbonisation targets in ways that are 'fair, create just transitions and are nature positive and offer wide-ranging benefits where possible' (Wales Net Zero Challenge Group, 2024:i). Supporting policy has not yet been announced by the Labour run Welsh Government that faces uncertain elections in 2026. The Northern Ireland Climate Change Act came into force in 2022. It includes the ambition of 100 per cent reduction by 2050. In November 2024, after a period of public consultation, the NI government approved legislation to establish its first three carbon budgets and an interim target of 77% reduction by 2040 in accordance with the Climate Change Act (Black, 2021; Department for Energy Security & Net Zero and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2022; Northern Ireland Assembly, 2024)

2.2.2 Progress

Progress on emissions reductions has generally been positive with the UK having sustained reductions in the decade 2014-2024 (CCC, 2025). UK emissions in 2024 were estimated as 413.7 MtCO₂e. The main sectoral sources of emissions in 2024 were domestic transport, building and building product uses, energy, industry and

² The Court's deadline for the Government to produce a revised CDDP is October 2025.

agriculture (Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, 2025b). The CCC estimates that by 2024, the UK had reduced emissions to 50.4% lower than the 1990 level (CCC, 2025) largely as a result of decarbonisation in the energy sector notably in electricity supply, with 2024 seeing the closure of the last UK coal-fired power station, alongside progress in the decarbonisation of industry. However, there was also a rise in aviation emissions. Other important reductions have occurred in emissions from industry and residential buildings. These changes have come primarily from improved efficiency in household appliances and production processes (The Climate Brief, 2019). Emissions across these three sectors have fallen by 22.2 per cent, 8.1 per cent and 7.2 per cent respectively (Climate Change Committee, 2024). The reduction in business energy usage also reflects the changing shape of the economy. The 49 per cent drop in emissions since 1990, reflected territorial emissions and does not take into account the emissions embedded in goods and services consumed in the UK but produced elsewhere. Thus, despite carbon emission reductions being on target for the third carbon budget (2018-2022) and ambitious targets being set, to date, the UK is not on track to reach its climate goals because of insufficient policies and funding in place (Climate Action Tracker, 2025). It is also notable that to reach those targets, the vast majority of emissions savings (more than 80%) will need to come from sectors other than energy supply, in areas such as transport, buildings, industry and agriculture. Yet the CCC estimates that overall, just under two-thirds of the UK's emissions reductions needed in these sectors are covered by credible plans to meet 2030 targets (Op cit).

2.3 Climate policy-making

There is a complex and changing set of bodies responsible for the environment and climate change within UK government. Environmental matters are led by the Minister for the Environment and Rural Affairs, with decarbonisation policy overseen by a separate department and the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero. The Climate Change Act of

2008 also established the UK's Climate Change Committee (CCC) as an independent, statutory body. The purpose of the CCC is to advise the UK and devolved governments on how emissions targets can be achieved and monitor the progress made towards achieving them (Climate Change Committee, 2023). The CCA also created a new government department, the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) housing core civil service expertise on climate issues. However, the UK government apparatus had faced considerable instability (Norris and Adam, 2017). For example, in 2016, DECC was abolished and climate policy was passed as a sub-responsibility within the newly formed Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). In February 2023, BEIS was split to form three new Departments one of which was the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (GOV.UK, 2023a). Thus, while the climate targets have remained in place or become more ambitious, the changes in responsibilities and framing within (new) departments variously prioritising business, industrial or energy policy has created inconsistencies in approach and often a hiatus of focused activity. The work of government departments is scrutinised by Parliamentary Select Committees, who call on experts and wider consultation to review progress and recommend change to government policy, a process in which UK unions sometimes engage (see below). The key committee in this respect is the Environmental Audit Committee, although others, such as the Business Committee, also scrutinise topics such as the skills needs for the energy transition.

While the UK is highly centralised politically, local governments do have a range of statutory responsibilities which have the potential to impact on emissions levels. This includes spatial planning, transport planning, waste collection and disposal, education, social housing provision and social care. Non-statutory responsibilities include leisure and recreation and parks and green spaces. However, the capacity of local government to act on climate has been severely constrained by a lack of powers and funding (Yuille, Tyfield and Willis, 2021). Between 2010 and 2020 it was estimated that



local councils, on average lost more than 60 per cent of government funding (Local Government Association, 2018) with cuts often falling more heavily in areas which had suffered as a result of previous rounds of industrial restructuring (Gray and Barford, 2018). While limited in resources to act, many local authorities and related anchor institutions have declared a climate emergency and there has been a number of experiments in localised climate action planning such as ‘mini-Stern’³ reviews, Place-based Climate Action Networks (PCAN), local climate commissions and transition towns (Aiken, 2012; Gouldson et al., 2012; Bryant and Stone, 2020; Howarth et al., 2023). These initiatives have emerged to galvanise public, private and civil society actors at the local level. While these experiments in local institution building suffer from limited resources (Howarth et al., 2023) they

have resulted in additional space for UK unions to potentially engage on climate issues.

2.4 Shifting UK climate politics

The passing of the 2008 Climate Change Act suggested, cross-party agreement between the major political parties on the need to take urgent climate action. Although, despite this broad consensus, climate policy during government of the Conservative party (2009–2024) became rather contradictory. A number of concrete policies were proposed and then reversed even while emission reduction targets were increased (Carter and Pearson, 2022). For example, in 2015, the Conservative government discontinued subsidies for building onshore wind farms and tightened

³ In 2006 Nicholas Stern published *The Economics of Climate Change* which made the case for early action on climate change on economic grounds as long term costs will be much higher. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/publication/the-economics-of-climate-change-the-stern-review/>

planning restrictions, leading the number of planning applications to fall from 237 in 2011-2015 to 8 in 2016-2020 (Windemer, 2020). Meanwhile, £10 billion in tax relief was available for oil and gas companies between 2016 and 2020 (Green Alliance, 2021). The 2022 update of the UK's NDC (Department for Energy Security & Net Zero and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2022)⁴ noted the government's approach to net zero would be reviewed to ensure targets are delivered in a way that is 'pro-business and pro-growth'. This led to a scaling back of net zero commitments in relation to electric cars, the electrification of domestic heat and home insulation (Horton, 2023). The need for this revised framing was attributed by the then Conservative government to changes in economic conditions, including high energy prices and inflation levels triggered by the Russian invasion of the Ukraine (op cit 2022, p. 11). The war in Ukraine triggered concerns about energy security which had not been part of public policy discourse but was interpreted as requiring an urgent action. For some, this implied the need to more rapidly scale up renewable energy; however, the Conservative government used the war to make the case for continued North Sea oil and gas production. The British Energy Security Strategy of 2022 published under Boris Johnson's leadership did not explicitly commit to further oil and gas expansion, but in July 2023, under Rishi Sunak, the government announced plans for new North Sea oil and gas licenses, claiming that these would make the UK more energy independent (GOV.UK, 2023b), although this claim has been challenged by analysis that notes that government's own figures show 83 per cent of North Sea oil is exported (UK Parliament POST, 2022).

This indicated a change to the apparent consensus over climate politics between the two main political parties through the creation of climate as a 'wedge issue' where the Conservative party sought to distinguish its approach to climate change against that of Labour as the UK headed

for a general election in 2024. Furthermore, the Conservative government's new stance suggested a disjuncture between public opinion (including those of Tory voters) which is broadly in favour of action on climate, and the views of party MPs and Conservative Party members who are more sceptical (Carter and Pearson, 2022). The emergence of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and its successor Reform, with its more pronounced climate sceptic positions is also felt to have pushed the Conservative party towards taking less climate friendly positions (Carter and Little, 2021).

The Labour party has also shown a degree of inconsistency in its approach to the climate challenge. In opposition, and notably under the more socialist oriented leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, (2015-2020) significant proposals for action on climate change were central to Labour's agenda. For example, a National Transformation Fund which would have invested £250 billion over ten years in upgrading the economy was proposed in the 2019 election manifesto (Carter and Little, 2021). Under the subsequent leadership of Keir Starmer, the proposed 'Green Prosperity Plan' included a pledge to invest £28 billion a year every year until 2030 to develop a green economy. Although, as borrowing costs rose dramatically in 2022, Labour pulled back from this pledge to focus on fiscal prudence as a key electoral strategy. Funding commitments were scaled back, although the 'clean energy mission' has been a core feature of policy enacted by the new Labour government elected in 2024. Yet, within this wider policy arena, getting climate policy actors to seriously engage with the need for equity within climate policy-making has been an ongoing challenge for unions, as we see in section 2.7. But first, section 2.5 outlines current UK decarbonisation policy, followed by an overview of UK industrial relations in section 2.6 helping to set analysis of union climate positions in context

⁴ NDC, Nationally Determined Contributions are the statements by the nations that are signatories to the UNFCCC Climate Agreement (commonly known as the Paris Agreement, 2015) of the actions being taken to contribute to global climate targets.

2.5 UK decarbonisation policy

UK plans to deliver emissions targets (as set out in the UK's carbon budgets 4, 5, and 6, i.e. up to 2037) were laid out in the 2021 in the Net Zero Strategy (HM Government, 2021), and the supporting sector strategies included a commitment to fully decarbonise power by 2035 and investment to pump prime the development of new technologies and low-carbon industrial clusters, alongside a phaseout of internal combustion engines (ICEs) and home energy efficiency. Energy transition plans have primarily focused on offshore wind and nuclear power with offshore wind production planned to increase to 50GW by 2030 including 5GW of floating wind (HM Government, 2023). Since its election in 2024, the Labour UK Government has committed to double onshore wind capacity to 30 GW and increase offshore production to 60 GW by 2030. These present significant increases in contracted capacity and required changes to transmission capacity and infrastructure planning to enable delivery (NESO, 2024).

The UK's industrial decarbonisation strategy (BEIS, 2021) has made progress but also faced considerable challenge. Action has included a range of market-based initiatives covering climate levy, cap and trade measures (such as Emissions Trading) and subsidies for especially energy intensive businesses to enhance energy efficiency and accelerate new net zero technologies. These initiatives sat alongside plans for improving low-carbon transitions within six identified geographic clusters. The cluster model has aimed to build infrastructure for 5GW of hydrogen production and 6MtCO₂e of carbon capture and storage by 2030⁵. Clusters centre around locations with major concentrations of CO₂ emitters: gas and biomass power stations, refineries and manufacturing industries notably glass, fertilizer, steel, and chemicals. Complementary plans aim to build infrastructure to store CO₂ in depleted gas

reservoirs under in the North Sea and Liverpool Bay (HyNet, 2020; Vivid Economics, 2020). Funding was given for two (Track-1) clusters in 2022. Plans for decarbonisation of more dispersed industrial sites are critiqued as being less well developed, causing significant concerns in areas where manufacturing supports large numbers of local jobs (Rattle, Gailani and Taylor, 2024). While the CO₂ transport infrastructure plans are now in place for Track-1 clusters, plans for the further Track-2 clusters are stalled and the lack of progress on industrial carbon capture and storage technologies means that concerns on an over reliance on untested technologies seem warranted. The CCC assessed in that it is very unlikely the low-carbon cluster model will reduce emissions at the pace required to meet carbon budget targets (CCC, 2025).

The surface transport sector is one of the highest emitting sectors in the UK responsible for an estimated 30% of emissions in 2024. Decarbonisation plans rely heavily on increasing the uptake of electric vehicles and phasing out the internal combustion engines (ICE). Key policies have included a commitment to end the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2035 as well as increasing the amount of active travel and increasing rail capacity (Department for Transport, 2021). There have been changes in policy commitments on the rate and scale of phase out of vehicles with ICEs as the breakdown in climate consensus has led to, for examples the Conservative Prime Minister branding such measures as a 'war' on motorists (Wolmar, 2023). A slowdown in UK EV sales in 2022/23 coincided with Government's decision to delay the 2030 phase-out date. The Labour government has reinstated tougher targets and EV take-up has increased, but the CCC also noted that ICE emissions reductions since 2008 have been offset by the growth in the proportion of larger cars on the road (CCC, 2024). Aviation is also problematic. The CCC estimates that the sector generates more CO₂e emissions than the

⁵ Hydrogen is closely connected to CCS due to the need for the waste CO₂ produced by blue hydrogen production to be captured via CCS technologies to help ensure this technology is step forward for CO₂ mitigation.

electricity supply sector. The sector will, for the first time, be included in the 6th carbon budget (2033-2037) but fuel switching plans are still considered ‘ambitious,’ and as airport expansion and consumer demand continues to increase, confidence in sector plans remain weak.

Buildings are also a major contributor to UK emissions; an estimated 20%. In terms of reducing emissions, the CCC reports that the indicators for decarbonisation of this sector are also off track. The risk of missing targets has increased, primarily due to policy announcements made in 2023 to increase the number of households exempt from the planned gas boiler ban, delaying the gas boiler ban and getting rid of a target for the private-rented sector to increase energy efficiency ratings (CCC, 2024; CCC, 2025). Private home insulation rollout rates declined considerably after support was withdrawn in 2012 and have never recovered (Climate Change Committee, 2021).

Proposals for more collective solutions at the local level to address housing emissions, notably in social housing are being advanced by the TUC in partnership with local authorities. The Labour government introduced a Warm Homes Plan in November 2024, increasing budgets for a boiler upgrade scheme and funds for householders to install a heat pump which has led to an increase in applications and 2024 saw an increase in heat-pump installation and usage. The plan also proposes to reintroduce minimum energy efficiency standards for rented properties, launch funding specifically for social housing and lower income householders to improve insulation and low-carbon heating and give more support for UK heat pump manufacturers. Yet despite these improvements, the CCC in 2025 notes that the main challenge continues to be the very high price of electricity and thus makes this their main recommendation to Government. Energy costs are significant for both domestic and industrial users. More radical demand reduction strategies are not being given serious

consideration despite evidence that they can offer pathways to significant emissions reductions without compromising population wellbeing (Creutzig et al., 2022).

UK government climate policy-making has placed a heavy reliance on market mechanisms and a scepticism towards interventions that could be perceived to be as protectionist or distorting the functioning of markets (Vaughan and Macalister, 2015). In practice, this has meant the UK government has been generally unwilling to provide significant financial support to advance the development of low-carbon technologies. Unions and ENGOs have long argued that a well-funded, state managed transition process could offer opportunities especially for areas that face economic and social inequalities as pre-existing infrastructural advantages could be used to attract green investments. Yet, this is unlikely to happen without a clear and consistent industrial policy, significant investment and an overhaul of the skills system (Emden and Murphy, 2019).

The UK’s reluctant approach has the potential to put the UK at a disadvantage when attracting green investment akin to the ‘paradox of thrift’ (Zenghellis, 2012) in a context when for example the USA, under the Biden administration, offered \$369 billion in green subsidies or EU measures which allow EU member states to “match” these incentives to try and keep green investments in Europe, notably via its Fit for 55 programme (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022; European Commission, 2023). The Labour government’s policy agenda has signalled a stronger interventionist stance, with a view to generate market conditions that will expand private investment.

Clean energy is viewed as key sector in outline plans for a new UK Industrial Strategy which targets sub-sectors offering growth potential (UK Government, 2024). Energy transition policy has centred on the creation of a publicly owned renewable energy company, Great British Energy,

and commitment to end North Sea oil and gas exploration⁶ alongside a National Wealth Fund to accelerate investment in renewable energy, the Crown Estate Bill to remove restrictions on investment and planning in renewable infrastructure, notably for onshore wind, coupled with announcements for action on green homes, sustainable aviation, bio-diversity and land management.

The government has committed to introduce the UK Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), similar to that being adopted by the EU in 2027 which places a tariff (price) on the carbon emitted in making imported goods and has announced plans within the contracts for difference scheme to reduce risks to renewables investors. Additional funding via the Clean Industry Bonus aims to incentivise shorter (local) supply chains and more sustainable means of production in the offshore wind sector (Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, 2024a) with the hope of increasing job opportunities in disadvantaged regions. This includes an element on skills training, and the policy was updated in 2025 include the onshore wind sector and increased expectations of subsidised developers to sign a fair work charter (UK Government 2025a).

Although the UK was an early adopter of climate targets, the current net zero pathways and supporting policy have lacked clear and sustained focus. This is not only an observation of union and labour organisations taking part in this study, but also the Committee on Climate Change. In 2023, the CCC commented in 2023 that the government needed to ‘stay firm on existing commitments and move to delivery’ (Climate Change Committee, 2023, p.14). In 2024, just after the election of the new Labour government it noted, ‘the new Government will have to act fast to hit the country’s commitments’ (Committee on Climate Change, 2024, p.18).

In 2025, while recognising renewed commitment that the revised NDC did suggest that targets were reachable, effective progress needed significant changes, notably in the substitution of fossil fuels by low-carbon electricity in surface transport, heat in buildings, and industry, enhanced nature-based solutions and breakthroughs in engineered removals. Before examining the role of UK trade unions in national climate debates, the following subsection outlines some of the key features of UK trade unionism to help set the context within which UK unions are formulating their climate demands.

2.6 Trade unions in the UK

The main UK trade union confederation is the Trades Union Congress (TUC) which includes TUC Wales and six regions of England. The Scottish TUC is independent⁷. The majority of union membership is concentrated in the 48 unions affiliated to the TUC (5.5 of the 6.25 million UK union members) and almost half of all UK union members are in three large TUC general unions: UNITE (1.25 million), UNISON (1.21 million) and GMB (0.57 million). The TUC has no direct role in the constitution of individual unions nor in collective bargaining. As such, its core role is one of coordination, representation of the interests of affiliates and lobbying government. UK unions have a range of organisational dynamics, orientations and identities. Some UK unions are structured around occupations, such as the nurses, teachers and university lecturers unions (RCN, NEU and UCU respectively). There are a few sectoral unions remain, such as retail and warehousing, communication workers, food manufacturing and transport (USDAW, CWU, BFAW, RMT and ASLEF). Most of the occupational and sectoral unions are considered medium to small sized compared to the larger conglomerates noted above as ‘general’ unions. Merger activity has been a key feature of UK unionism, with the main

⁶ with a caveat that licences granted under the conservative government may go ahead (BBC News, 2023) although a major decision over Rosebank (the UK’s largest untapped oil field) is pending subject to legal review (Clarke-Ezzidio, 2024)

⁷ The TUC does not cover Northern Ireland (NI): UK unions with members in NI (an estimated 200,000) affiliate to the Irish TU confederation

three unions absorbing many craft and industry-based unions. The GMB, UNITE and UNISON often organise workers in the same sectors creating a degree of competition for members between the large unions.

While in international comparative terms UK unions are viewed as generally market-oriented (Hyman, 2001), differences in specific union identities are also noted, from more radical or class orientations such as in the RMT (Connolly and Darlington, 2012) to more societally oriented ones such as in UNISON. There are also different UK union traditions in the relations between officers and members ranging from more participative to managerial forms of unionism (Heery and Kelly 1994). These differences in union type become pertinent in the discussion on contestation around just transition and how and through whom worker interests are articulated.

2.6.1 Trade union relations with government

UK industrial relations (IR) are rooted in a tradition of voluntary collective bargaining between employers and unions and with relatively limited intervention of the state and legal system. For example, collective agreements are not binding on the employer and cannot be enforced through legal recourse. A relatively more corporatist system of industrial relations did exist for a while in the post-world-war II era (Flanders and Clegg, 1954; Brown, 2010) but institutions of tripartite dialogue were largely dismantled following the Conservative government's turn towards neo-liberalism after 1979 and trade union rights were rolled back and at times vilified by the state. The Labour Government (1997-2010) did introduce some modest increases in union rights but a greater emphasis was placed on individual rights propelled by EU Social partner agreements (Brown, 2011) emblematic of the 'New Labour' or 'third-way' centrist approach (Giddens, 1999). Although the Labour government led by Tony Blair was more approachable to unions than the previous administration, New Labour also promoted itself as a party of business and unions were seen as one of many stakeholders amongst other civil society actors, rather than a core constituent of a tripartite dialogue.

Towards the end of the 1997-2019 Labour administration specific dialogue did develop with environment ministers and UK unions via the TUC on energy policy and just transition. This was not sustained for long under the Coalition and Conservative-led administrations which followed (see climate policy-making below). In opposition, the Labour Party, especially under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn developed closer working relations with unions on climate issues, notably in developing 'green new deal' type proposals and advocating for the public ownership of energy in the unsuccessful 2019 election manifesto. Under the leadership of Keir Starmer, the Labour Party gave limited public support to trade unions pre-election. In taking a more centrist turn, it dropped more radical proposals to distance itself from 'Corbynism' although there was ongoing engagement with unions through the Labour Party policy forums. Relations between unions and the Conservative government in power from 2010-2024 were distant. Although regular meetings take place between TUC officers and government officials in a range of Departments (including Business and Environment) there was limited engagement at Cabinet Office level. Relations worsened during a particularly intense period of industrial action in the UK after the COVID-19 pandemic. In the period June to December 2022, over 2.4 million days were taken as strike action (ONS, 2023). While relations between the Labour Government and unions have remained strained over some key policy areas, unions report an increased level of dialogue and engagement in policy dialogues with labour Ministers and officials explored in section 2.7 and 2.8 below.

2.6.2 UK union coverage and changing representation

Union membership in 2023 was at 22.4 per cent density with 6.4 million members (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2024) a dramatic fall from 13.2 million in 1979 predominantly through a decline of members in the private sector. Currently, membership density in the private sector is at 12.0 per cent, and at 48.6 per cent in the public sector. Union members are concentrated in larger

workplaces and bargaining predominantly takes place at the company level, although there is some sectoral pay bargaining (e.g. nurses, teachers, some university staff). The UK has no permanent tripartite body through which union concerns are relayed directly to policymakers (OECD and AIAS, 2021).

Employee representation is broadly through unions however they must be recognised for bargaining purposes and there is no automatic legal right for collective bargaining. The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) indicated that 23 per cent of all workers were covered by collective bargaining arrangements, with 58 per cent of public sector wages set by collective agreement and some professions continue to be covered by advisory pay review bodies. This falls to 16 per cent in the private sector. While there is provision for Works Councils under the EU information and consultation directive, they are limited in the UK (Marginson et al., 2004). Nor are there statutory rights for employee representation at board level.



UK unions have had some but limited success in organising new parts of the economy and have needed to respond to the changing composition of the workforce that has seen a growth in female and migrant workers. Recent job growth has tended to be in sectors which have low levels of trade union density whilst those sectors which are declining have higher levels of union density. As a result, union density is expected to further decline, although this effect is flattened by the fact that the employment in some sectors with higher density (utilities, transport and storage) are likely to remain stable (Wright and McIvor, 2021). Some suggest that, despite advances in productivity, the declining proportion of national income going to wages (from 66 per cent in 1975 to 55 per cent in 2016) is a result of the declining power of trade unions (Brown and Wright, 2018). There has also been an increase in the proportion of workers engaged in low paid work (defined as work which pays less than two thirds of the median hourly wage). In 2016, this applied to 21 per cent of the workforce in comparison to 13 per cent of the workforce in the late 1970s (op cit).

In this context of weakened power and visibility, UK unions have adopted a range of strategies, from (voluntary) partnership approaches with employers to a more focused member recruitment and organising. Others note a turn to litigation or political lobbying, or a combination of strategies, as unions seek renewal (Fairbrother, 2015). The emergence of environment and climate change as a theme within the UK labour movement needs to be seen within this fluctuating set of relations with the state, workers, employers and within across a diversity of union types and orientations. As we see below, unions have often used environmental arguments to bolster established union demands such as greater public ownership (and a reversing of the push for privatisation) or in reasserting the role of the public sector. However, getting climate policy actors to seriously engage with considerations such as the need for equity within climate policy and the significance of work and employment within this is an ongoing challenge.

2.7 The role of unions in climate policy-making

UK unions have generally been operating in an anti-union environment with limited opportunities to participate in climate policymaking despite a long-established policy dialogue within the UK labour movement on environmental issues (Hampton, 2015; Cutter, 2025). The position of unions within the climate policy-making process can be generally characterised as one of exclusion or silencing of union voice. At the UK level there has been some capacity to influence UK climate policy through policy advisory or departmental scrutiny bodies, although unions have found these bodies' composition often skewed towards business interests. There has been greater scope for unions to engage in climate issues in the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales. At the UK level, changes in the machinery of government have meant that advisory bodies and consultative groups have also faced considerable turbulence, limiting impact. As a response to exclusion from more formal policy forums, unions have engaged in lobbying, working with international trade union climate bodies (such as the ETUC/ITUC or Global Union Federations) and developed alliances with other stakeholders as alternative routes to representing workers' climate interests often at the regional or local scale. The data presented here relates to interviews mostly undertaken before the election of the Labour government in 2024. While some of the tendencies that have led to the exclusion of unions in UK climate policy-making over the past 15 years have changed, the outcomes for unions and workers of those changes are not yet clear.

2.7.1 Unions and climate policy formation

The predominant mechanism to influence climate policy mentioned by unionists are ad-hoc advisory and consultation. These mechanisms are often centred on aspects of existing government policy for specific sector decarbonisation plans, notably energy decarbonisation rather than the overall direction of climate policy. However, labour representatives often felt disappointed with the level of say they get on those consultation bodies.

For example, unions discussed the Green Jobs Taskforce (GJTF), which was established in 2020 to produce an independent report on the skills needed for the transition to net zero. There were two seats for trade unions including the TUC and chair of the TUCs committee on the environment and climate change, TUSDAC (The Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee). The report from the GJTF included a number of proposals that favoured worker voice and support for transition, such as the development of a Skills and Productivity Board and a national body for workforce transition, both of which could draw on union expertise to formulate (skills) policies and transition strategies. However, these potentially worker-friendly recommendations were not referenced in the subsequent Net Zero strategy that the GJTF report was supposed to inform. The Green Jobs Delivery Group, established as the successor body to implement the recommendations of the GJTF, initially included union representatives on the oversight board, but their role was downgraded to roles within specific working groups. As one union respondent noted:

“Our voice is not being valued sufficiently. It is very much a political thing. I don't think it was an employer driven thing. But also, I think it's partly because in a way, government is outsourcing the work to trade bodies to deliver on their particular sectors, and they don't see a role for trade unions in that”

IV4_ Union Federation Officer

This is seen to illustrate the ways in which union voice has been marginalised. Furthermore, there was a perception from affiliate unions that the GJTF did not consider the interests of workers in the fossil fuel extraction sectors. This was seen as a problem by unions representing workers in the energy and oil and gas sectors, who argued that these workers needed to be given special consideration because they are already being impacted by decarbonisation policies:

“They [offshore oil and gas workers] are not being treated with the sort of respect they need to be by government. The government has things like green jobs task force... that includes cars, car manufacturing, you know, electric cars, and it doesn’t really do anything about offshore work at the sharp end of all this.”

IV22_ Energy Union Officer

Trade unions with members that are potentially vulnerable in the energy transition see the key challenge of climate policy in foregrounding the interests of these workers. This framing is quite distinct from the extant climate policy discourse, which emphasises future opportunities in terms of green jobs and the skills needs of the ‘new’ economy, rather than a focus on the transition of workers in the ‘old’ economy.

2.7.2 Unions and Parliamentary Climate Policy Scrutiny

In addition to policy consultation bodies, UK policy-making is shaped by the work of Parliamentary Select Committees. These are scrutiny committees, made up of MPs from across all parliamentary parties, scrutinising policy outcomes for each government department. They are well respected due to having expert input and while they have no legislative powers, play a key role in holding government to account and indirectly influencing legislative and policy changes (Benton and Russell, 2013). They function by producing reports supported with evidence called for via open consultation and by calling on expert witnesses. In a recent survey of the evidence both written and oral, trade unions provided an estimated 2 per cent of the evidence submitted to all select committees, in contrast to over 17 per cent by businesses and their representatives (Geddes, 2018). Some of the UK union officers interviewed had contributed to formal consultations on topics such as green recovery post-COVID and the transition away from

fossil fuels (Environmental Audit Committee, 2021, 2022). Each of these reports had submissions from UNITE and the RMT. But these are single submissions amongst the dozens of others from employer groups, think tanks and academics and there is little evidence that specific worker-focused proposals are adopted as key recommendations. Other unions interviewed noted that they have not contributed to climate policy consultations ceding ground to other groups across civil society with greater expertise on some of the technical details of climate policy, as one officer explained:

“So, we’ve had some limited role, but we’ve not been yet regularly appearing at select committee(s), like some groups and (we’ve) not been doing quite long technical consultations - there are lots of green groups out there, you know, coalitions as well, who submit things. ... I guess we’ve got to try and get what is relevant and what is our unique point of view from across our groups. And know we are not duplicating things that other people are doing.”

IV18_Other Union Officer

Set in the context of limited union resources, the preparation of detailed climate policy papers has not been a key priority for many UK unions.

2.7.3 Lobbying activity

Many union respondents also noted the resort to lobbying directly with ministers and key civil servants in relevant government departments in Westminster or the nations of Wales and Scotland⁸. At the UK level, important channels for lobbying also exist through relations with the Labour Party² and with the Scottish National Party. Several interview respondents noted that they had largely given up on efforts to engage with the conservative administration on climate and environmental matters. They focused efforts on engaging with the Labour Party through both informal lobbying and

8 with the Northern Ireland the Stormont Assembly remained suspended during the period of our study

9 currently in opposition in Westminster and in government in the Welsh Senedd Cymru

the more formalised Labour Policy Conference, a policy-making process that engages a range of labour affiliated groups including trade unions. Consultation papers were launched by the Labour Party in 2022, for example on a ‘Green and Digital Future’ (Labour Party, 2022a) and negotiations took place in Summer 2023 over the content of the Labour Party manifesto for general election. Union respondents felt that they had achieved some success in the Labour Party’s commitment to establish Great British Energy, a proposal for a publicly owned energy company, a national wealth fund - taking a stake in green economy investments - and a stated commitment to work with unions, especially the ‘energy unions’ and energy workers in the energy sector transition (Labour Party, 2022b, p. 17).

UNISON, GMB and UNITE also worked with the Labour party at local levels to embed worker voice within relations with receptive (Labour-led) local authorities by working with the Local Government Association (LGA), the body that ‘represents the voice of local government’. In 2022, the LGA adopted a Labour Local Government and Trade Union Principles document (Local Government Association, 2022) which outlines ‘how Labour councils and the local government trade unions in England will work together to safeguard and deliver quality public services and employment’ (p1) and includes intentions to promote good industrial relations and to ‘work together to bring public attention to the continued threat of climate change’ (op cit). Some of the practical collaborations between local authorities and unions at the local level on climate policy and action are discussed in Section 3.

2.7.4 Direct policy dialogue – the changing status of TUSDAC

Trade union exclusion from direct policy dialogue on environmental issues has not always been the case. In 1998, TUSDAC was established as a TUC committee, and as a joint advisory group between environment ministers, civil servants, the TUC and union general secretaries engaging primarily

in policy dialogue primarily on energy, emissions trade scheme (ETS) and carbon pricing policy. This emerged from collaboration between the GMB general secretary and Department for Environment and Transport. One union respondent recalled that the creation of TUSDAC prompted a more focused engagement from the TUC and union general secretaries on the topic of sustainability.

In addition to TUSDAC, Labour ministers for Business and Environment established the Just Transition Forum (O’Neill, 2009; HM Government, BEIS and DECC, 2010) that included representatives from Government, national, regional and local bodies, union and business organisations, along with third sector bodies. A GMB officer went on secondment to the Department of Environment and Transport, tasked with developing a report on workplace issues, the findings of which solidified much of the thinking behind the TUC’s ‘Greening the Workplace programme’ (see below).

TUSDAC has hosted high-profile environment conferences at which Labour environment ministers spoke in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Hampton, 2015) helping to build discussion across the UK labour movement on environmental issues and bring forward a greater number of motions at TUC Congress on the topic. TUSDAC continued as a TUC committee, the Coalition government of 2010 and subsequent Conservative governments downgraded the status of TUSDAC from a ministerial advisory body. The Just Transition Forum was also replaced by the Coalition government’s Green Economy Council. The make-up of this successor body changed with only two seats for unions and 20 for business, illustrating again a relative downgrading of union voice in climate policy-making. Nevertheless, TUC officers consider that there were some positive legacies that emerged from these earlier forums in which unions were more generally welcomed within UK climate policy-making.

“There was a lot of carryovers of enthusiasm of this whole thing from the Just Transition Forum [to the Green Economy Council]. Some of the same people were turning up from the employers... They wanted to see things happen. We agreed to three workstreams, a lot influenced by the work of the TUC on skills and one on energy intensive industries and another on finance for the transition.... Two workstreams made a fair bit of headway on skills for a green economy and the on the energy intensive industries, steel, cement, and so on. ... the TUC produced a report on the challenges facing each of these sectors. So, although the Green Economy Council sort of petered out, oddly the energy intensive working group carried on, and they valued the impact that the TUC had in producing our own documents which encouraged the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) to produce its own [decarbonisation] pathway reports.”

V12_Union Federation Officer

The activity that developed by the TUC, both within TUSDAC and through the Greening the Workplace programme, also helped provide a framework for union engagement in climate policy and just transition policy formation in the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.

2.7.5 Procedural gains in devolved nations

There are distinct political contexts in the devolved nations of the UK. Labour and Scottish National parties have held power in Wales and Scotland respectively and been somewhat more receptive to unions and equity concerns about action on climate change. Scotland can be viewed as being a frontrunner in just transition policy-making as there is now the legal obligation to consider the impact of decarbonisation on regions and on sectors and to propose policies to mitigate against those impacts. A Just Transition Commission was established in 2018 and began work in 2019, tasked with supporting and monitoring the government's Just Transition plans (Scottish Government, 2022a, Scottish Just Transition Commission, 2023). The Just Transition Commission includes

representation from the Scottish TUC, Prospect, UNITE alongside environmental NGOs (WWF, 2050 Climate Group), academics, and industry stakeholders. The Commission has met regularly to try and advance its mission to develop ‘a fair transition to net zero emissions in Scotland, undertaken in partnership with those affected.’ (Scottish Just Transition Commission, 2023). Concrete outcomes include the establishment of a Ministerial post within government, currently titled the Minister for Just Transition, Employability and Fair Work who will engage directly with the Commission. Commissioners have commented on the Scottish Government's Draft Energy Strategy in addition to sector briefings for Transport, Land use and Agriculture and the Built Environment and Construction (Just Transition Commission, 2023). Whilst relatively nascent, the Commission appears to have given unions a foothold in climate policy-making and a route to represent the interests of workers. In the words of one Scottish unionist:

“I think there is an appetite within the Scottish Government and politically at least within their political leadership to ensure workers are part of this discussion and to make sure workers are not left behind.”

IV7_NGO

At the same unionist also noted that there were ongoing tensions between government and union actors in relation to how union advice was being enacted. For example, there were concerns that the commentary submitted to the Scottish Government on the draft energy bill by the Commission had not been taken on board:

“The just transition plan for the energy sector was really poor and that was criticised by quite a lot of people for being sort of restating an existing policy, [with] very little actual recognition of who's going to be impacted and how the policies could tackle that either in terms of captured opportunities or mitigating risks.”

IV23_UK Federation Officer

A Commission report at the end of its first three years (Scottish Just Transition Commission, 2023) expressed doubts on whether the machinery of government in Scotland could effectively integrate policy and action on just transition. Reflecting on events, the Commission suggested that any confidence in the idea of a Just Transition was being put in jeopardy by a lack of concrete actions to support workers:

“Despite progress in applying a just transition approach to policy development and planning at the national level, the tangible benefits in people’s everyday lives are yet to be felt. Instead, we have seen [...] a lack of progress on fundamental just transition building blocks such as the energy skills passport, and the announcement of plans to abruptly close the oil refinery at Grangemouth in 2025 with hundreds of associated redundancies. We are now in a critical period for the public credibility of just transition as an approach to the decarbonisation challenge ahead.”

Just Transition Commission, 2023

Thus, while there has been a degree of commitment to core principles of just transition and resources allocated to achieving just transition objectives, when these objectives collide with other entrenched policy objectives that prioritise growth and market mechanisms, the Just Transition Commission has not had the political influence to affect substantive change to the ways that climate and economic policy impacts on workers. Establishing the Commission has been an important step in getting worker voice into public debate on climate mitigation, but union actors expressed reservations about the depth of the Scottish government’s ability to integrate just transition practices into their broader approach:

“So, I think that the just transition team might be serious about making this work in a way that’s genuinely helpful. But until there is the actual alignment of this, you won’t see it. I think what you get is the Scottish Government being eager to embrace terms and ideas which are seen as

socially progressive up until the point at which they become in conflict with the priorities of industry and business.”

IV7_Union Federation Officer

This constructive critique of government by the SJTC however, appears to have had some impact. A much more sustained response to the prospect of closure of the Grangemouth refinery by government and key stakeholders is now evident. The prospect of the negative impact on the wider industrial cluster that surrounds the refinery is now the subject of a more in-depth and wider consultation. In addition, there is stronger local governance arrangements around the design and implementation of a just transition plan for the area along with border representation of unions and community organisations.

In Wales, the broader policy framework is more conducive to the inclusion of workers in policy dialogue on climate and social justice. This is shaped by the Welsh Assembly Government’s Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) which requires public bodies to consider the long-term impact of their decisions and to work more effectively with communities to address persistent problems including poverty, health inequalities and climate change. This policy architecture has provided a stronger framework for social partner engagement in climate policy-making, including with unions. Evidence of this was the inclusion of unions in consultations on net zero plans in Wales and the decarbonisation of the public and private sectors. In addition, the Social Partnership and Procurement Act, SPPA (2023) in Wales established a Social Partnership Council that involves equal representation (nine each) of employers and worker representative groups alongside government representatives. This is seen as a positive development and one that provides more scope for worker voice at the national level. TUC Wales notes however, that there is much more to do to build local union capacity to effectively engage in the dialogue mechanisms that are developing around net-zero:

“So, I think that’s really positive, but it’s still really new, and we have a lot of work to do ourselves in terms doing some short briefings around building union capacity and about the new provisions in the [Social Partnership and Procurement] Act, so that they can be asking the right questions, and making sure they’re involved in all the groups that the employers have got on net zero.”

IV25_Union Federation Officer

The development of specific dialogue and policy mechanisms in Scotland and Wales provide positive examples of the ways in which unions in the UK could be involved in policy-making. However, these are new institutions in formation and the material impacts on workers are less clear and they do not (yet) constitute powerful mechanisms for change. The Scottish JTC notes that the concept had been embedded as ‘a high-level goal’ (op cit) but that a next phase is needed to develop specific ‘policies, actions and investments’, warning that to invoke the concept of just transition without this underpinning should avoided.

2.8 Union opportunities and constraints in climate policy-making

The review of union engagement in climate policy-making has highlighted limited opportunities for influence. However, it is not just a matter of exclusion. UK trade unions’ focus on the environment and climate change has waxed and waned over the past 20 years. This section explores the opportunities and constraints that unions report in seeking to advance their influence on climate issues. Opportunities have arisen through external funding enabling union capacity alongside external drivers such as the changing public discourse prompted by the youth climate movements. Unions have also faced considerable resource constraint in embedding climate work, at times compounded by external shocks such as economic recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. Internal dynamics are also noted in terms of how officials view member

interests around the climate agenda, viewed by some as an opportunity and others as a constraint.

2.8.1 Building union climate capacity: Green reps

To support building capacity on climate issues and also to showcase the potential of union action on this agenda, the TUC led a structured programme of activity in the early 2000s focused on ‘Greening the Workplace.’ This was initially funded through the Carbon Trust’s Carbon Partnerships programme in 2006–2007, and a subsequently in 2008–2010 by the Trade Union Modernisation Fund (UMF). In addition to developing joint union-management action on decarbonisation, the programme supported the development of a new type of role for voluntary union representatives, the ‘green’ or ‘environmental rep’. This role focused initially on minimising workplace carbon emissions, although it has at times expanded to encompass topics of health, safety and air quality and the greening of production systems [IV12]. The projects were successful in their own terms (Stuart and Martinez Lucio, 2014) but the voluntary nature of the role and lack of supporting rights meant that once external funding came to an end much of the co-ordinating activity from within unions that supported workplace green reps also diminished. Although green rep training was offered and some activities have continued in local branches, national union priorities moved elsewhere particularly in the face of the global financial crisis of the 2008, the ensuing economic downturn and period of austerity. As one participant note

“Yes - we’ve not done a lot in many respects. I mean, looking back over the last ten years, ... we did have a peak of environmental interest activity in and around green reps and then the recession arrived 2008. This meant resources were pulled out but also levels of interest, I mean there were no green motions at our conference between 2008 and 2013, you know, in (that) crisis period.”

IV18_Other Union Officer



As such, the development of climate policy and activities of green reps was inconsistent and often not well integrated into other union work. Trade unions comment that the limited resources devoted to climate issues were compounded by the lack of rights to engage on the issue. As one TUC officer noted:

“The unions have very little capacity at the local level. This is one of the fundamental issues and also very little rights in terms of like reps getting time off to do training about environment, etc. There is no facility time for environment as such. So, there’s no supporting structures. There are very few, (green reps), even if they are very supportive and passionately and want to do something, they don’t necessarily know what it is they can do.”

IV4_Union Federation Officer

Although union engagement on climate issues re-emerged with the rise of Global consciousness, notably in 2019.

2.8.2 Climate debates in the context of ongoing crises

Structural issues were also noted with a lack of union density in some sectors and workplaces creating a challenge to union organising and establishing a clear strategy on climate issues especially in the private sector. Others noted that for some, working conditions in both the ‘old dirty’ and the ‘new green’ economy were also a constraint on organising with workers often very atomised, especially those on short term contracts [IV6]. Yet UK union activity on climate was re-activated in the wake of the global climate strikes in 2019, alongside an emergence of ‘green new deal’ style proposals within Labour party policy-making in terms that spoke to union interests (such as public ownership of the energy system). The UK hosting of COP in 2021 also provided space for union engagement in climate debates. Union engagement in climate change during the early 2020s does not appear to have waned in the light of the concurrent health and economic crises in the same way that it did after

the great recession of the 2010s. For example, a number of unions have continued to revive training for green reps, integrated the green rep role more effectively into branch structures and developed efforts to integrate the work of green reps into wider negotiations under the banner of ‘green bargaining’ (also see section 3.2 below). It was also suggested that the pandemic and cost of living crises had led to a wider public discourse that questioned the relationship between work, economy and the environment, opening up new spaces for dialogue on eco-social issues. In the words of one interviewee:

“The pandemic.. gave a little chink of hope that we would actually start to think about the economy in terms of the welfare of people instead of just the moneymaking.”

IV4_Union Federation Officer

Participants also noted that the pandemic illustrated the considerable differences in the way that working class and certain communities were more socially and economically vulnerable, offering a preview to the way in which climate change could worsen inequalities. This unexpected effect of COVID seemed to have a positive impact on the ability of some actors to organise workers on climate issues. An ENGO campaigning for a Just Transition in the oil and gas sector found that, as workers felt poorly treated by their employers and simultaneously had significant time on their hands due to the shutdown, they became more receptive to Just Transition messaging than pre-Pandemic. One interviewee noted:

“Something like 40 per cent of the offshore workforce were just dropped overnight because oil and gas dropped so much. They were really angry. All of the money that they had saved up to do [that] training was spent on like trying to stay alive because 75 per cent of them aren’t on core contracts. So, I think in many ways it was like we were there and talking about it at the exact time that workers had the time and the anger to engage with it.”

IV6_NGO

Workers had noted these trends as part of a broader pattern in which conditions had been eroding in the sector since the oil price crash in 2014, yet the extremes of the pandemic had helped raise awareness of vulnerabilities and potential exploitation of this group of workers creating an opportunity for organising on this theme.

2.8.2.1 Experiments in local climate politics

Within the context of union exclusion at the national level in climate policy-making, study participants noted examples of unions and other stakeholders trying to build new institutions as vehicles through which to respond to the climate crisis. The growing awareness of the need to address the climate emergency and examples of place-based climate action networks has led to experimentation in a number of localities to build forms of local climate governance, often using participatory methods to engage local communities in both building awareness and agreeing priorities for action (Howarth et al., 2023). Within this, unions have been active in seeking to embed principles of a just transition and thinking about employment and skills transition into climate policy. The emergence of the Scottish Just Transition Commission is one example of a more formal institution. Other ad-hoc institutions that unions have engaged in have merged at the local level and include examples such as the Yorkshire and Humberside Climate Commission (Cutter, Trappmann and Krause, 2023) where the regional TUC has been advocating for just transition principles to be embedded within regional climate plans and is now working with regional partner to try and achieve this (see section 3.2 below). These new forms of union engagement in climate initiatives, supported in some cases by the legislative changes (as in Scotland and Wales) are viewed as procedural gains that create the opportunity for union engagement in climate policy with a range of stakeholders. However, these new formations function as soft regulatory tools with limited powers. As ad-hoc developments that are often reliant on short term external funding and as such are rather vulnerable, their anticipated gains for workers are limited. One union officer notes that while they are supportive of the development of regional initiatives, that rationale for engagement is a pragmatic one: given the lack of

a coherent national policy, opportunities to engage at least in some localities has become one, albeit second best, option to advance worker interests on climate issues:

“We were going down this way with local authorities, because we know that we can probably have better talks with personalities or political institutions within [some] local governments than we can have with national government. And that’s fair enough, because we do what trade unionists do and try and find a way through adversity. And that’s what we’ve done. So, we don’t think that’s perfect in all ways, but we do it because we think we’re going to get more noise from that.”

IV27_Energy Union Officer

Working with the new local climate bodies can also present a challenge to the traditional ways of working and the institutional frameworks that unions are more used to working within, notably geographic rather than sectoral or workplace. Engagement with local authorities (other than as employers) in questions of local economic development and workforce and skills planning is relatively new terrain for many within unions, and new groups of stakeholders have limited experience of working with unions meaning that unions face questions of how best to build trust and legitimacy.

2.8.3 Unions in from the cold?

Since the election of Labour in 2024, the wider political context has meant that government policy discourse has included reference to engagement with the union movement. Relations between Government and TUSDAC were revived and outline plans for new bodies such as the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, Office for Clean Energy Jobs and Skills England mention the need to work with unions which signals a change in approach to union engagement. For example, the Office for Clean Energy Jobs within DESNZ aims to work with the new skills body, Skills England (an arms-length body within the Department for Education) and the Migration Advisory Committee with a remit to focus on boosting the skills needed for net zero and the

creation of ‘clean energy jobs that are high quality, with fair pay and favourable terms and good working conditions’ that will ‘engage with across the energy sector, trade unions and industry to deliver’ (Skills England, 2024, p. 43), which suggest that unions will have more opportunity to engage in climate policy-making. Yet how these developments unfold and the role that unions play within them is yet to be seen.

2.9 Union climate policy positions and demands

Unions’ climate policy demands focus on the need for joined up policies which can deliver benefits for both workers and the climate as well as addressing a range of UK specific problems such as high energy costs and poor housing stock. These are often framed within well-established UK union demands that seek to improve worker rights and welfare protections, challenge privatisation and stem the decline in manufacturing. There is consensus on the need for more government intervention with respect to pro-climate infrastructure and a broad rejection of the market-based approach that has been a central feature of UK climate policy. The analysis of union policy documents and interviews indicate that unions are supportive of climate policies which deliver benefits to workers by the creation of decent jobs and advocate for public investment that promotes shorter and more localised supply chains, which could help rebuild UK manufacturing capacity. They support policies which offer benefits to UK workers more broadly, such as investment in public services, which would concurrently reduce emissions. These demands came to the fore following COVID-19 framed as the need for a green stimulus package, or ‘green new deal’, and as a necessary response to relatively poor economic performance. Suggested public investments often cover more than the just energy transition and include calls to invest in cycling and walking infrastructure, an expansion of public transport, retrofitting programmes, improvements to internet infrastructure to facilitate working from home and investments in research and development (Prospect, 2020; see for example Wales TUC, 2020a; RMT, 2021).



2.9.1 Public Ownership

Energy

A key demand has been the call for public ownership of the energy system. Reports published by the TUC in 2022 and 2023 call for establishment of a public energy champion able to accelerate decarbonisation, deliver energy independence, create high skilled high quality green jobs and lower bills (TUC, 2022, 2023a). Specifically, this would involve ownership, or more likely co-ownership with other partners, of zero carbon energy generation such as off-shore wind and zero-carbon hydrogen. The assumption is that a public energy company would grow by investing into new energy generation rather than the nationalisation of existing power assets estimated at £114-153 billion, thereby the investment required to create an entity comparable with France's EDF (TUC 2023a). As one union representative:

“Largely we’ve called for complete fundamental transformation of the energy system through democratic public ownership so ideally we have a public owned grid and then public or local government owned players within that system which is quite far from the current model [...] I guess the other policy would be when you do outsource certain things or when you give licenses, would be to make those licenses contingent or conditional on providing jobs locally and providing good jobs locally.”

IV23_Union Federation Officer

Unions have argued that publicly owned energy generation could increase the rate of decarbonisation by allowing the government to set achieve higher renewable GW targets for 2030 and beyond. It could also enable more control over the quality of jobs created ensuring climate change

policy benefits local communities (TUC 2023a). Public ownership of floating offshore wind is viewed as especially critical due to the possibility of job creation in the supply chain (fabrication yards, factories for nacelles, towers, blades, foundations cables, and substations) and more dockside as opposed to offshore work (TUC 2022). The TUC has also previously proposed taking the Big 5 energy retailers into public ownership, suggesting that they could be acquired for around £2.85 billion (TUC 2022). These themes are echoed in research and reports by the Scottish TUC which make a case for public ownership by flagging up the role that non-Scottish companies have in ScotWind leases, finding that only 5 per cent are Scottish companies, 85 per cent are private non-Scottish companies and 10 per cent are publicly owned non-Scottish companies. This report suggests that for the large numbers of jobs to be created as promised by Scottish ministers, pro-active measures to develop the offshore wind supply are necessary and calls for such investment as well as a Scottish National Energy Company and a skills programme to support entry into this type of work (STUC, 2019).

UNISON has also long supported public ownership of the retail energy sector, which could include energy retail staff providing a national advice service for customers on renewable energy and retrofit solutions. This policy is tied to improving the affordability of energy in the UK and other aspects of their proposal include capping energy costs at 5 per cent of household income, retrofitting and workforce development to ensure that this work can be carried out (UNISON, 2019). PCS has also have a broad vision for the public sector, arguing in favour of public ownership and control over a wide range of service delivery in the civil and public services (PCS, 2024) with the effect that these services exist to meet people's need rather than generate profit. They suggest a radically reformed role of the Civil Service, arguing that a National Climate and Biodiversity Service (NCS) modelled on the National Health Service (NHS) is necessary. NCS would cover energy, building and construction, transport, the circular economy, agriculture, the Crown Estate, culture, education and training. They

suggest that this would allow improved coordination between departments and improved cross-government working, including between devolved, regional and local government with the aim of putting social and economic justice at the heart of climate policies.

UNITE is also campaigning on this issue, highlighting in a 2023 report how public ownership could have saved UK consumers £45 billion or £1,800 per household had the policy been implemented in 2021 (Unite, 2023). The union also presented a motion calling for the energy industry to be returned to public ownership at the 2023 Labour party conference. The motion was overwhelmingly passed by delegates. GMB has been more reticent on this issue, suggesting that an investigation into the corporate behaviour of energy companies is necessary and that the longer-term goal would be public ownership of the industry (GMB, 2021).

Although the call for full nationalisation has not been adopted by Labour in government, it has accelerated the national energy grid system operator (NESO) into public ownership to provide strategic oversight and announced the creation of Great British Energy, a publicly owned power company that aims to develop renewable energy projects and stimulate investments from the private sector (Department for Energy Security & Net Zero, 2024b) The TUC felt that it had made key contributions to popularise these developments:

“So, the TUC does this work on thinking about how to make sure that media reporting on these issues reflects the real views of workers rather than kind of, you know, necessarily assumptions. We have sort of ideas generation. So, you know, the kind of direct work, particularly on Great British Energy. You can say that the TUC did kind of the intellectual work basically, as well as ensuring that there was union buy-in to it. We think or we hope that was influential in Labour adopting that policy.”

IV19_Union Federation Officer

Public transport

Another key proposition from the TUC (2023b) lays out how public transport needs to expand to meet the needs of a climate emergency. Working jointly with the RMT, the TUC calls for additional annualised capital expenditure on buses, trams and rail of around £10bn per year up to 2035, additional operating expenditure by 2030 buses, trams and trains, expansion and electrification of the rail network and to make buses zero emission. This investment would be paid for by reallocating funding from high-carbon projects such as road expansions and by bringing rail and bus services back into public ownership, preventing cash from leaking out of the system, and by the introduction of an Eco-Levy as a fair replacement for fuel duty. This scale-up of the public transport network

is anticipated by the TUC to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs in the public transport operation, manufacture and construction. Public ownership of the rail companies is also viewed as a climate demand by unions. RMT felt they had been influential in the decision to take ScotRail into public ownership and for the relaunch of a night train from London to Scotland (“Caledonian sleeper”). This type of structural reform can promote the decarbonisation of travel, help ensure that job quality is maintained, and prices remain affordable [IV21]. Labour made rail nationalisation a manifesto commitment and as franchises end it will do so with the first being announced for 2025, alongside proposed devolution of the control of rail services to the elected metro mayors.



2.9.2 Housing Insulation and Retrofit

The UK's housing stock is the least efficient in Europe (UNITE, 2021a) meaning that retrofitting insulation and low-carbon heating is an obvious step and a policy area supported by a majority of unions. They suggest that an annual investment of £470 million could create 7,000 jobs a year for decades (UNITE, 2021). Retrofitting could also form a key plank of the proposed NCS and be applied to social housing and public buildings. Prospect suggests retrofitting could occur via a mix of loans, grants, and tax incentives for insulation and zero carbon heating with a government advice service supporting people to make the necessary changes (Prospect, 2020). The issue of housing insulation, especially for poorer households came to the fore during the energy crisis of 2022 when an offshoot of the Extinction Rebellion group called Insulate Britain blocked roads demanding that the government insulate all social housing in Britain by 2025 and produce a legally binding national plan to fund low carbon retrofits to all homes in Britain by 2030 (Insulate Britain, 2023). The TUC has supported calls for the creation of a Warm Homes Agency and national warm homes plan in particular proposing a 'multi-decade National Retrofit Plan... to provide stability and enable investment into delivery, supply chains and skills' and the inclusion of this plan as part of wider industrial strategy (TUC, 2024, pp. 2–3). The TUC has also worked with a retrofit campaign group to produce guidance for unions (initially developed by the NEU) as a guide to campaigning for retrofit at work (TUC and RAFT, 2022). In terms of domestic retrofit, the TUC is working via emerging local and regional climate governance bodies (see below) to engage unions and local authorities on promoting the unions role in social housing retrofit. The Labour government has announced a Warm Homes Plan with funding for households and local authorities to accelerate insulation and target low-income households, the connection with wider industrial strategy plan is not (yet) made¹⁰. Rather, the Warm Homes Plan includes proposals to stimulate the UK heat pump

manufacturing market and makes reference to working with unions to ensure good jobs its supply chain.

2.9.3 Variegated demands for decarbonisation pathways

While there is broad union support for the renationalisation of utilities and transport, there is a divergence in policy approaches to decarbonisation. Government policy sets out energy transition that supports expanding off-shore, and now on-shore wind, a commitment to nuclear and support innovation in hydrogen and CCSU as preferred solutions to decarbonising power and manufacturing. The TUC is generally supportive of these technological approaches. Support is particularly expressed from unions with members in the energy and high energy use manufacturing industries likely to be affected by the decarbonisation of energy production systems. CCSU is also supported due in part to its potential to revitalise areas which have been affected by previous rounds of industrial change such as Yorkshire and the Humberside, the North East and the North West regions.

The precise role that hydrogen should play in UK decarbonisation is keenly debated. Whilst its use in industry is relatively uncontroversial the role it should play in the decarbonisation of domestic heating is contested. GMB support an extensive hydrogen economy including for household heating, suggesting it can be blended into the natural gas supply to a rate of 20 per cent with minimal disruption to householders. In combination with synthetic gas and biogas hydrogen is viewed as 'a sustainable future for the gas workforce and the transmission network', whereas heat pumps are not viewed as a practical option from an installation perspective and would increase the demand on the grid. Hydrogen powered transport is also viewed favourably (GMB 2021, 16). UNITE welcomed the potential for hydrogen powered vehicles but noted the issues around the sourcing of hydrogen

¹⁰ The UK government sought consultation on its proposed 10-year Industrial Strategy (Invest 2035) in November 2024.

if extracted from natural gas. (Unite Environment Issue 4). In terms of the desired energy mix in a decarbonised future, whilst a significant increase of offshore wind production is viewed as crucial by all actors, a number of fault lines exist around the importance of nuclear. Prospect, GMB and UNITE, who represent workers in that industry, are highly supportive of new nuclear (GMB 2021; UNITE 2021; Prospect 2020), whereas UNISON has, since 2006, opposed it. However, that position appears to be changing as in 2022 a national conference motion was passed to develop an internal deliberation process to explore the pros and cons of ‘new nuclear’ with its membership. At the 2023 energy sector conference within UNISON a motion was carried to ‘draft a pro-nuclear position as part of a balanced zero carbon electricity generation system’ (UNISON 2023, 13) These contestations within the UK labour movement are explored further in Section 3.3.

2.9.4 Better industrial policy

There has been a clear consensus across UK unions of their critique the lack of industrial policy that could help propel the green transition. The preference for market mechanisms is criticised as ineffective, in as much as it creates uncertainty about specific decarbonisation pathways and the speed of transition. As one interviewee explained, this uncertainty is irksome even for the private sector, which desires a degree of policy continuity before it is willing to invest:

“Our experience here in Scotland is that the government likes to say, ‘It’s not our job to pick winners,’ right? We will create an environment where the market will pick the winners and make the decisions about where the investment goes,’ and then you sit in the meetings with the people who are absolutely red in tooth and claw, neo-liberal marketeers, who say, ‘No, actually, we’d quite like the government to do that, please, because then we can have market certainty and that means that we make better profits.”

IV3_Energy Union Officer

GMB has highlighted the failure of subsidies to produce jobs in the Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy (LCREE) noting that the number of jobs in this sector has actually fallen since 2014. In terms of funding net zero investments, both Prospect and GMB support a movement away from a levy on individual consumers as a regressive form of taxation. Prospect has previously argued that funding could be achieved by ‘issuing new sovereign green bonds, through new progressive tax mechanisms, and by re-establishing a public Net Zero Investment Bank to provide development financing for emerging clean energy technologies’ (Prospect, 2020, p. 7). GMB appears more supportive of funding policies through general taxation (GMB 2021). Throughout union proposals, including those by GMB, UNITE, UNISON, RMT, Prospect and PCS, unions note an over-reliance on private capital to deliver net zero goals and suggest a greater role for public investment to ensure that climate targets are met. This also offers a way to enshrine principles of decent work in public procurement to help ensure workers benefit from the transition (GMB 2021; UNISON 2021; Prospect 2020).

In addition to advocating for more proactive public intervention, many unions added that good green policy design could offer the potential to address significant regional inequalities (which have resulted from previous rounds of industrial restructuring or ‘unjust’ transitions). The hope was that deprived communities could flourish through access to good quality jobs, raised incomes, aspirations and living standards:

“We see [a] need for a just transition in practice in areas of the UK which are most socially and economically deprived. So, the government doesn’t talk about it so much now about the levelling up agenda and we believe that the creation of good green jobs in those economic areas, can have a very positive, not just economic effect but also social impact, and potentially an intergenerational impact if people can get into those decent jobs”

IV2_Energy Union Officer

While many aspects of climate demands are uncontroversial in that they advocate for worker benefits, and the potential to create jobs, unions also highlight the need for investment and change in the skills system to help workers prepare for these opportunities. Current climate policy-making offers less clear support for those workers located in sectors that will shrink or be phased out to meet climate targets: notably in fossil fuel related activities. The speed of this ‘phaseout’ is a critical issue for unions within climate policy-making. The current approach to decarbonisation makes it unclear as to who exactly will be impacted by climate policy, and how: whether it is current workers that will face a transition, or a future generation that will need to acquire green skills. Differences in the pace of change matter, especially for the unions representing oil and gas and energy sector workers that are facing the prospect of transition now. The contestation between unions on this point is explored below. However, all unions stress that the UK skill system needs improving to support climate plans.

2.9.5 Investment in Green Skills

The need for investment in skills training is a key area where unions have consistently made demands for additional funding and more effective collaboration on the design of ‘green’ training frameworks for both new entrants and the existing workforce. As one representative noted: “There’s this massive gap at the moment between the government’s industrial strategy and our education strategy’ [IV14]. A representative from UCU flagged how the chronic underfunding of the Further Education sector (FE) means that there are not enough people available to train the educators and trainers needed for the upgrading of skills required for the green transition.

In one attempt to map the skills needs of the energy sector, Centrica and the GMB brought together a variety of stakeholders to consider the implications of changes in the energy sector on careers and how to ensure that there is a just transition for the existing high carbon workforce in the UK. The subsequent Future Energy Skills Programme report co-sponsored by the GMB and Centrica identified

the need to review the provision from universities, FE and apprenticeship providers, to increase funding and enable more flexibility in the training system to be more responsive to emergent training needs. It proposed a fairer and more regionally targeted approach, such as ‘national retraining programme/s which equips existing carbon-intensive workers, and new workers in areas where carbon-intensive industries are concentrated with hydrogen skills” (The Future Energy Skills Programme, 2023, p. 32). While climate activists within the union movement have been pointedly critical of the narrow framing and scale of ambition of the GMB-Centrica report (Latif, 2023a), the research and analysis is welcomed for illustrating the weakness of the UK’s skill systems.

The Labour government has established a new Office for Clean Energy Jobs with DESNZ that aims to work with the new skills body, Skills England (an arms-length body within the Department for Education) and the Migration Advisory Committee with a remit to focus on boosting the skills needed for net zero and the creation of ‘clean energy jobs that are high quality, with fair pay and favourable terms and good working conditions’ that will ‘engage with across the energy sector, trade unions and industry to deliver’ (Skills England 2024, p43).

While much of energy policy is driven by Westminster, some powers are devolved with respect to policy and funding on skills. This provides space within which unions can seek to address climate related themes. Examples are discussed further in the section on just transition activities in Section 3 below. Before turning to just transition debates and actions, the final part of this section explores the alliances developed between UK unions and other actors in advancing their climate and just transition policy demands.

2.10 Union Climate Alliances

Given the exclusion of the union voice in UK climate policy-making at the UK level, there has been a tendency to focus on working with allies either locally or through the international union federations

of the ETUC and ITUC and global trade unions, notably IndustriAll and PSI. Early accounts of the formation of the climate agenda at the international level networks note the contribution of the TUC in these developments. These often reference the work of the TUC's Greening the Workplace initiative and the evolution of the green rep as helping frame stronger claims for union engagement within UNFCCC policy-making. Commentators suggest this culminated in creation of a Trade Union NGO forum at COP and the eventual adoption of just transition as a concept within the international climate policy (Martín Murillo, 2012; Morena, Krause and Stevis, 2020; Rosemberg, 2020).

In addition, UK Unions have worked in alliance with a range of other actors to advocate for specific aspects of climate policy at the UK level, including working with both ENGOs and, at times, business networks. The TUC states that it does not enter into formal alliances [IV1] but has had working relationships with a number of climate organisations including Greenpeace, the European Climate Foundation, the Carbon Trust and the Greener Jobs Alliance (a network of union climate activists). Working relations in climate policy debates are also noted with some employer bodies, especially but not exclusively in the energy and manufacturing sectors. The documentary evidence and interviews suggest that many of these collaborative activities tend to be ad-hoc, opportunistic and focused fairly narrowly. While there is some reference to wider climate policy debates, most of these collaborative activities focus on union specific themes of green jobs, just transitions, training and skills.

Both formal and informal collaborations with ENGOs have become a route for both unions and their collaborators to try and intervene in climate policy debates. Perhaps the most transformative has been the Scottish Just Transition Partnership discussed above: a formal alliance between ENGOs including Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, World Wildlife Fund, Friends of the Earth, and unions including Unison, UNITE, UCU, PCS and the STUC. ENGO activists have also built alliances with workers. For example, members of Friends of the Earth supported striking

workers protesting the loss of manufacturing jobs in the off-shore wind supply chain. Platform, an ENGO campaigning for a transition away from oil and gas production, built on-the-ground relations with North Sea oil rig workers and developed collaborations with RMT, UNITE, PCS and UNISON. In 2023 Platform produced the Our Power, report based on 3 years of research with oil and gas workers and laid out their perspectives on what would be needed for a Just Transition (Platform and Friends of the Earth Scotland, 2023). Data from the study has been quoted in a number of official reports including the Green Jobs Taskforce and Environmental Audit Committee investigation into green jobs (Green Jobs Taskforce, 2021; Environmental Audit Committee, 2022).

Union alliances with ENGOs have also developed at the regional level. A group of climate activists set up South Yorkshire Climate Alliance with the explicit intention of developing links with trade unions, partly through their own trade union activism and partly through the recruitment of sympathetic individuals within the union movement to run a joint campaign around climate jobs. This campaign drew from the contents of the 'mini-Stern reviews' undertaken in some regions, which outlined how the co-benefits of investment in tackling climate change could create new jobs. Similar activities have taken place in Wales, with ENGOs asking the Welsh TUC to speak about how climate change policies have the potential to deliver benefits for vulnerable workers at youth climate strike rallies in the runup to COP20 [IV24]. UCU have collaborated with student organisations pushing for change such as Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS). This emerged out of UCU support for the Fridays for the Future leading to close collaboration on projects: SOS has developed climate Continued Professional Development modules for UCU reps and UCU has spoken to students at SOS events about work and workers in a Just Transition. Recent activity with ENGOs has been relatively narrowly focused on work and jobs transitions rather than any wider engagement on climate policy. While some union officials noted a degree of scepticism about working with environmental groups or climate activists within their union, where collaboration appears to

have been successful it is through climate groups managing to articulate an understanding of how work and class relations matter when planning for green transitions and stressing the importance of the notion of justice – albeit variously defined.

Union collaborations on climate-related issues are, however, not exclusively with environmental groups. Unions, notably those in the energy and high energy use manufacturing sectors have also developed working links with industry organisations on climate related themes.

The GMB-Centrica project on energy skills mentioned above worked jointly with Prospect, UNITE and UNISON to report skills needs and training gaps in an attempt to lobby for new resources and training infrastructure as the UK government prepared to launch a Net Zero and Nature workforce plan in 2024. This alliance of unions and business organisations was partially a response to the failure of the Net Zero Strategy to implement recommendations of the GJTF and meaningfully consider the worker voice in skills policy. While collaboration with employers is more common in countries with stronger traditions of social partnership, this is rather exceptional in the UK, but the interviews with union officers illustrated examples of how unions were looking to find common ground with employer bodies on climate and employment issues. UNITE has worked with employer bodies, the UK Petroleum Industry Association (UKPIA) and the Chemical Industries Association (CIA) to identify common interests, for example inviting them to speak at respective (union) national sector rep conferences. A UNITE report of the Chemicals sector conference recommended future ‘formalised and regular engagement with Chemical Industries Association (CIA)’ that would enable the sharing of information and develop ‘alternative plans for the future of manufacturing in the sector’. It further noted ‘it was suggested that the interests and policies of the unions and the employers in the sector have never been so aligned’ (Unite, 2023 p4) - a point echoed by a sector representative:

“In terms of impartiality, they’re there to represent their members, but their members are who my

members work for, right? So, they’re pulling in the same direction the union’s pulling in, right?”

IV20_Energy Union Officer

Similarly, the presence of the petroleum industry body was perceived to be beneficial due to their shared need to influence government policy. The UKPIA presence at a UNITE sector rep conference enabled the employer body to push an agenda favoured by fossil fuel producers. The UNITE sector conference report noted the UKPIA stated:

“The most dangerous net zero policy would be the closure of all UK production, to be replaced by imports from overseas” along with the need to “address [worker] attraction and perception issues by making clear the sector’s pivotal role in our low carbon future.”

UNITE, 2023 internal document

In addition to the external alliances, collaboration has also emerged within and across the UK union movement on climate issues, most notably via the Greener Jobs Alliance (GJA). Established in 2010, the alliance ostensibly promotes the need for skills training and job creation to meet the needs of low carbon sectors and the ‘greening’ of the wider economy. The alliance is formed of a number of unions and ENGOs (PSC, UCU, NUS, TUC, Greenpeace FOE, People and Planet) although the GJA stresses it is a ‘loose coalition of organisations’ and that some views expressed do not reflect position of organisations worked with and includes union officers, reps and members who are also climate activists. There is a common thread of advocating for national and local collective action to develop the workforce and stimulate demand for clean energy and energy efficiency (Greener Jobs Alliance, 2020). The GJA has produced climate training for unions and regular bulletins that often critique both government climate policy and the leadership of unions where they are felt to have retreated from more progressive climate positions. These points of contestation are explored in section 3 below.

3. Just Transition Debates

UK union just transition debates are broadly shaped by the **industrial relations context** and **climate policy frameworks** within which they operate as discussed above.

In the absence of clear policy dialogue with government through institutions such as national or sectoral social partnership mechanisms, a core emphasis is placed on securing additional union rights and on building the capacity of reps and officers to negotiate with employers and other stakeholders on transition issues to ensure that worker interests are represented within climate plans. The primary location for engagement and action by UK unions to advance just transition demands is mainly at the workplace but also through looking to create or adapt local climate institutions to establish dialogue on worker just transitions and green skills. While core union demands continue to be centred on protection for workers affected by processes of restructuring, specific TUC demands has shifted over time and, as we see below, is contested within the UK union movement. A notable cleavage has emerged between the demands made by unions that term themselves the ‘UK energy unions’ and others. Section 3.1 examines how just transition has developed as a concept at the level of the TUC and then looks at specific developments in Wales and Scotland. Section 3.2 gives an overview of the practical approaches to further just transitions. The forms and issues of contestation around the concept of just transition within the UK union movement are then examined in Section 3.3. Section 3.4 concludes by discussing how just transition is interpreted in the UK.

3.1 Just Transition Demands

3.1.1 UK-wide

TUC demands for a just transition have been long established but only stated with a degree of clarity since 2019. The term just transition was first used by British unions in the TUC’s Congress Report of 1998, with TUC officers reporting back their attendance at the 1997 Kyoto Conference on Climate Change (TUC, 1998). It noted the work of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in advancing the question of social and employment rights within plans to address the climate crisis, and the TUC report stressed ‘the dangers to jobs of

not acting on climate change and also the need to ensure a just transition in economic sectors where climate change policies will have an employment impact’ (TUC, 1998). This document focused on equalising the distribution of the ‘costs and benefits’ of the low-carbon transition. A subsequent TUC document of 2008 showcased how unions in the US, Canada, Spain and Argentina were working on environmental issues within the framing of a just transition (TUC, 2009). Invoking the early use of the term just transition in the USA by Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) – see Morena et al 2020 for a discussion of the origins of just transition – the TUC called for similar action in the UK.

By 2008, the framing of just transition was significantly expanded from the 1998 reference, to include demands for proactive dialogue with workers and communities negatively affected alongside calling for a national framework for the long-term planning of a just transition to include education and training, action on decent green jobs, welfare packages for workers losing their jobs or facing significant job change, coupled with support for affected communities as well as substantial funding and monitoring of the employment effects of the green transition. This call for policy action on just transition is reprised in several subsequent TUC documents advocating for a just transition in adaptation as well as mitigation measures and foregrounding the role of workplace environmental or green reps (TUC Unionlearn, 2010). In 2014, the TUC signed the ITUC’s Climate Action Pledge, which included reference to just transition in similar terms of the need for planning, multi-level dialogue and ‘sustainable investment in jobs with training and education, re-employment policies, social protection and economic justice” (TUC, 2014, p. 1). In 2015, the TUC in collaboration with Greenpeace produced a report outlining the rationale for supporting the green transition, examining the case for change and the potential for job opportunities in sectors (mentioning renewables, oil and gas, energy intensive manufacturing and aviation). A core framing is around the need for a socially just transition requiring a national Just Transition Plan

informed and implemented by multiple stakeholders including ‘citizens, communities, and trade unions’ (TUC and Greenpeace, 2015, p. 25). However, these recommendations had limited reference to work and skills other than the need for updating of apprenticeships to equip young people with the skills needed for the green transition. In effect, the document reads as written by Greenpeace, with little mention of decent work or the mechanisms by which workers might advance their interests.

In 2019, the TUC produced its first formal statement on just transition (TUC, 2019a) which clearly draws on the criteria outlined in the 2015 ILO Guidance and highlights priorities under four headings (i) a clear and funded path to a low-carbon economy; (ii) workers must be at the heart of delivering these plans; (iii) every worker should have access to funding to improve their skills; (iv) new green jobs must be good jobs (p6-9). The TUC further updated its demands in 2022 to stress the key objectives for a just transition as (v) demanding a climate and jobs action plan in every workplace, negotiated with workers and their unions, (vi) government investment in ‘future-proofing infrastructure, industries and jobs’, (vii) the call for a national Just Transition Commission and (viii) for climate action to be led by the public sector: councils, health services, education and public energy companies coupled with (ix) policies that protect against offshoring and (x) statutory rights for environmental reps in the workplace. The TUC’s 2019 statement also makes reference to ‘our brothers and sisters – especially our sisters – across the world’ (TUC, 2019a, p. 5), highlighting a UN estimate that up to 80 per cent of those displaced by climate change in some regions will be women (op cit).

The key mechanisms through which just transition demands could be realised are a national just transition body and workplace transition agreements, alongside increased investment in skills. Emphasis is placed on reintroducing lifelong learning accounts¹¹ to support the retention of

the skills potentially being lost in those industries potentially being phased out, an enhanced role of unions in designing apprenticeship frameworks and training to prepare workers for jobs in ‘transitioning technologies’ (p6). The TUC demands are also framed in terms likened to a ‘levelling-up’ policy discourse and the potential for ensuring that new green economy jobs are available in the same areas where jobs are being lost and for green investment to be targeted to regions with relatively high unemployment, supported by a stronger state role in the procurement of energy and decarbonised infrastructures. TUC demands have a degree of consistency in calling for the protection of workers negatively affected by green transitions, public investment in decarbonisation policy, the need for new bargaining and dialogue institutions to support the transition and in the demand that new green jobs should be ‘good’ jobs, defined in terms of ‘equivalence’ as follows:

“Every new job created right across the economy is of an equivalent standard to those that workers in many industrial sectors have now, with trade union recognition, decent pay, terms and conditions, high standards of health and safety, and a fair pension.”

TUC, 2019a, p. 9

There have also been different emphases to the scope of transition policy, at times making reference to affected local communities and international solidarity and at other times not. More recently there has been increased emphasis on the role of the public sector in supporting climate action and the green transition. The scope has tended to be broad in terms of the sectors facing transition and in the demands for decent work.

These broader demands made by the TUC can be contrasted to those set out in a pamphlet produced jointly between Prospect, GMB, UNITE and UNISON in December 2018, describing themselves as the UK’s ‘energy unions’ (i.e. those that represent

11 An approach championed by New Labour in 1997 to empower to adult learners to continue to access education and training.

workers in various segments of the energy sector from generation to supply and retail). A notable quotation from the pamphlet emphasises a key point about just transition efforts: “The test for any just transition is whether those most affected (authors emphasis) are allowed to lead the debate and have ownership of the priorities. If not, it cannot be a just transition” (Prospect et al., 2018, p. 1), stressing that it is energy workers that should be placed more centrally in the process of framing just transition demands. The ten demands laid out in this document were presented as an acronym for ‘transition’: (i) training and skills development; (ii) relocation is fully-funded and voluntary; (iii) adapting to climate change drawing on the expertise and insights of energy workers; (iv) new jobs with comparable terms and conditions; (v) the secure supply of affordable energy; (vi) influence and a voice over future policy; (vii) taking a long term and sustainable view; (viii) industrially focused and supporting a balanced energy policy; (ix) oversight and ownership – energy policy must serve the public good; (x) no communities left behind to bring about long term renewal.’ (Prospect et al., 2018 p2). The demands for investment in the UK infrastructures needed for transition make specific reference to UK automotive, aerospace, steel and construction sectors, alongside public programmes to support household energy efficiency and emergency response to extreme weather. Thus, the energy unions’ statement could be read as not only stating that the voice of energy workers should be prioritised, but also that the ‘energy unions’ should hold sway over climate policy as it affects a broad range of industrial sectors.

There are similarities and differences in emphasis between the TUC statement and that of the ‘energy unions’. Both reference the need for clearer and longer-term industrial decarbonisation strategies and the inclusion of the voice and expertise of workers in those decarbonisation plans. Another common theme is the need for better funding and frameworks for green skills training (for all workers, not just those entering the labour market) and decent employment conditions for those transitioning into green jobs. Yet there are differences in the demands for worker

protections, in the scope of just transition (the sectors prioritised and workers driving the transition), the definition of ‘good’ jobs in the transition and demands regarding the governance of Just Transition. Both statements refer to the need for ‘protections from off-shoring’ (TUC) or for achieving ‘a secure supply of affordable energy’ (energy unions). ‘Energy security’ is a term that was used politically by the Conservative government as a rationale for supporting the expansion of UK oil and gas licences as a response to the rising energy prices and uncertainty in supply due to the war in Ukraine and as a way to retain jobs in the UK. This framing has also been made forcefully by the general secretary of the GMB, Gary Smith (Pickard, 2023). It was notable that in our interview with a senior officer in an energy union, they were at pains to clarify that the union’s call for the protection or attraction of UK jobs should not be perceived as ethno-nationalist, stating:

“Now, that is not me sounding [a] right-wing ideology at all. I’m not saying UK[-born] workers, I’m saying workers based in the UK. That’s what I mean by that. And yet that [expansion of off-shore wind in the North Sea] was all done and called a just transition in certain quarters. But yeah, it didn’t help society in the UK because workers based in UK were not a part of that.”

IV27_Energy Union Officer

There is also a discrepancy between the energy unions and TUC Just Transition statements in the reference to supporting ‘a balanced energy policy’. This is shorthand to mean that any future energy strategy could include a range of energy generation options beyond wind and solar, including (blue) hydrogen and nuclear power, a demand that others in the union movement do not necessarily support. The idea of ‘balanced energy’ also encapsulates the ambiguity around how sections of the union movement advocate for the inclusion of (abated and natural) gas and oil within the UK energy mix, at least for some time to come.

The TUC calls for ‘green economy’ jobs to be good jobs and for improved bargaining rights ‘to ensure

good quality jobs with terms and conditions at least as good as those in energy, transitioning and carbon-intensive sectors' (TUC, 2019, p8). The energy unions call for new jobs to have comparable terms and conditions. These statements suggest a similar position. Yet the energy unions also emphasise that workers facing job transition should not see any erosion (detriment) in their working conditions. The TUC also sets out demands for just transition governance via a national just transition commission alongside a call for a key role of the public sector in managing the transition, which the energy unions do not. Notably, the TUC also includes 'public' energy companies within their definition of the public sector. Given the UK currently has an almost wholly privatised energy system, this implicitly calls for a move to public ownership. Interestingly, the energy unions as a group do not call for this. Although individual unions within the group (UNISON and UNITE) have been vocal on their calls for public ownership of energy, others (GMB and Prospect) have not. Section 4.3 explores in further detail the dimensions of contestation within the UK union movement around the definitions of, and policy needed for a just transition. Before exploring these, the following section considers the ways in which just transition is framed in the devolved nations of Wales and Scotland reflecting the different political contexts in which unions operate in those nations.

3.1.2 Scotland and Wales

It is notable that while Scotland and Wales have different economic structures and political histories, there has been explicit policy dialogue on just transition and a noticeably more favourable, although not complete, inclusion of unions in that dialogue. In Scotland, the reliance on North Sea oil and gas and the impending transition to renewables imply significant change for Scottish workers, sparking important transition issues, notably in the off-shore sectors. In Wales, the experience of the loss of coal and continued uncertainties over steel production has generated different orientations of both unions, government and civil society actors with respect to the priorities to be addressed within the green transition. While considerably

constrained by the power of the UK government in many respects, the administrations in Wales and Scotland have responded somewhat differently to the concept of a just transition for workers. Particularly in Wales, a broader policy focus on fair work and the interests of future generations and a commitment to develop social partnership provides a clearer framework within which TUC Wales can advance just transition demands. In Scotland it is notable that there is stronger collaboration between unions and ENGOs, a feature that is relatively absent in the Welsh and UK contexts. These different political contexts and opportunity structures have enabled more concrete forms of social dialogue and governance structures around just transition to emerge in Wales and Scotland: developments which are notably absent at the UK-wide level.

Wales

Specific just transition demands from Wales TUC emerged during the period of the COVID-pandemic in 2020. As such the TUC in Wales (Wales TUC, 2020) developed a detailed set of just transition demands connecting to a 'green recovery' as a strategy to offset the effects of the pandemic. The report has similar headings to the TUC's just transition statement yet is contextualised to reference the specific economic situation and Welsh institutional frameworks. Wales TUC demands (i) a clear and funded pathway to a green recovery and a net-zero economy; (ii) a central voice - Just Transition to be integral to the work of the new social partnership structure; (iii) the Welsh Government to promote fair work and good jobs; (iv) employers put worker voice at the heart of their transition plans; (v) and that every worker should have access to funded training to improve their skills.' (p8-17). Within the Welsh context, the Well-being of Future Generations (WFG) Act of 2015 is a cornerstone of legislation alongside the newly established Fair Work Commission in Wales and emergent social partnership mechanisms. In December 2022, the Welsh Government made a call for evidence as part of a consultation process on the form and focus of a just transition plan including the type of governance and engagement structures (the results of which have yet to be

announced). The TUC Wales response (Wales TUC, 2023) stresses the need for an oversight body that would include union representation. TUC Wales suggest that the Social Partnership Forum (which is now within law as part of the Social Partnership and Procurement Act, (2023) should include a sub-group on just transition to provide a mechanism through which the connections between the well-being of future generations and addressing climate change targets could be realised through a body with equal representation of a broad spectrum of employers and worker representatives. If accepted, this would potentially extend the reach of the tripartite SSP institutions, as current oversight mechanisms around the welfare of future generations policy primarily focus on the public sector and include multiple stakeholders beyond employers and unions.

Scotland

The relatively early engagement by the Scottish government in just transition policy-making is seen by some as the direct result of the demands made by unions in alliance with environmental NGOs. The Just Transition Partnership was established in 2016 with the STUC, UNITE Scotland, UNISON Scotland, UCU Scotland, CWU Scotland, PCS Scotland, Friends of the Earth Scotland and WWF (Worldwide Fund for Nature) Scotland. This alliance was felt to have considerable success in ensuring the inclusion of Just Transition principles within the Climate Change Scotland Act (2019). In 2021, the Partnership produced a manifesto (Just Transition Partnership Scotland, 2021, p. 1) ahead of elections to the Scottish parliament, Holyrood, urging politicians for ‘action to turn just transition rhetoric into reality’. Despite Just Transition being enshrined in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act of 2019, the Partnership highlighted a number of examples of ‘unjust’ transitions (see for example STUC, 2017; GMB, 2019) and lack of coordination and called for short and long-term actions. More immediate demands called on the Scottish government to be more strategic in its investment in renewable infrastructures, including ports and yards providing services and manufacturing for off-shore wind. Pointing to the unfulfilled promises of the green

jobs that had come from the growth in off-shore wind (STUC, 2017) the Partnership urged for (i) a review of planning and procurement rules that could help rebalance the advantage on ‘contract wins’ by Scottish and UK consortia helping to secure jobs within national supply chains and (ii) through investment in ‘green public works,’ (iii) a publicly owned energy and fossil fuel sector (North Sea Oil) decommissioning. In the longer term, the Partnership called for a (iv) Scottish just transition action plan and oversight body and (v) sectoral just transition agreements (Op cit).

This sub-section illustrates that union demands for just transition vary at the UK level between unions with different sectoral interests and also across the nations of Scotland and Wales, demands are refracted through both current and historical socio-economic transitions and specific sets of social and political institutions. These, in turn, provide some differences in the opportunity structures through which unions can establish on-the-ground just transition practices.



3.2 Just transition practices

The different branches of the UK union federation across nations and regions pursue a range of activities that advance their just transition demands. In England, the TUC has sought to generate alternative opportunities to working with a government that has not actively engaged at the national level on just transition as a policy tool (other than in the international sphere within the South African Just Energy Transition Partnership). Activities across the UK have included efforts to engage with or build new institutions. Much of the focus of UK union practices around climate change and just transition centre on building workplace institutions to include ‘green bargaining’ and worker representation on climate issues and trying to embed climate or environmental capacity within union organisation. At the sub-national level this includes engaging with local authorities, employers and other civil society actors to embed just transition principles and practices within emergent local climate plans.

3.2.1 Green bargaining and transition plans

A key focus has been placed by UK unions on ‘green bargaining’ within several STUC, TUC and individual union initiatives, notably UCU, UNISON, UNITE and Prospect, as part of a resurgence of UK union environmentalism post-2019. In 2023, the TUC recruited two new bargaining officers to support transition dialogues with unions representing members in the ‘high carbon manufacturing’ sectors of automotive and steel. The purpose of these roles is to help reps consider how to make just transition part of the negotiating agenda with employers, to help reps across a sector connect with others and use worker knowledge as a source of expertise on how plants might need to ‘retool,’ with new green technologies. In one example, the TUC officer is working with businesses that make components for the (ICE powered) auto sector, supporting efforts to access public funding for industry to access green technologies that can help firms transition their business model. The TUC aims to support company reps to integrate negotiations on employment and skills within these business transition projects (IV1

and IV26), thereby encouraging workplace reps and the employer to expand the scope of usual negotiations to look at longer-term employment and green skills needs. The TUC does not have bargaining rights at company level and so can only encourage local reps to do this.

There has been similar action in some of the TUC’s regions and in unions. For example, in Yorkshire and Humber, the TUC has recruited a green bargaining officer focused on engaging unions and local authorities around plans to retrofit social housing and in supporting the definition and delivery of the regional climate Commission’s action plan (also see below). Both industrial and service sector unions note this ‘turn’ to green bargaining in employer negotiations, although examples of negotiated transitions are quite rare. One includes support for workers affected by the energy transition policy and the closure of an EDF coal-fired power station in Yorkshire. This resulted in Prospect having long-term engagement with members, supporting their transfer to other parts of the business. There was also external advice provided for the workers affected and ongoing dialogue with the business through formal union consultation and engagement mechanisms. With Renewables UK, the sector trade body, Prospect also ran a pilot initiative, involving members that had transitioned into low-carbon sectors to provide advice for other members considering a similar transition. UNITE also note the negotiation of green jobs and skills training opportunities in the ‘greening’ of Keadby power station with its owner SSE. The currently gas-powered station is being developed to include a ‘power and carbon capture’ station, the first of its kind with planning permission in the UK. These negotiations are generally considered business as usual for unions with existing recognition and strong organisation in key high-carbon workplaces. Nevertheless, they are seen as notable because they encourage the employer to consider longer-term company transition or restructuring and related skills and employment issues.

In addition to considering worker protections and initiatives to ease the transition, manufacturing

unions also note efforts to engage with employers on ‘green’ production issues. Within UNITE, officers have supported workplace reps to develop and negotiate green manufacturing plans, including examples in aerospace and steel manufacturing. At Rolls Royce, three sites are under the threat of closure in the medium term the workplace representatives have adapted learning from the Lucas Plan model of 1970s (Elliot and Wainwright, 1982) to advocate for re-imagining the use of worker skills in socially useful and sustainable production (Minio-Paluello, 2021). A similar approach has been taken by UNITE and GMB reps in Tata Steel, advocating a worker-led plan for the transitioning of the Port Talbot site to use electric arc furnaces. The unions produced a set of worker-led proposals to transition the site and grow production in an attempt to retain jobs and skills (UNITE, 2022a, 2023a). The proposals project that the site could double production by 2035 through the growing market for green steel, a change in procurement rules so that public contracts use 100 per cent UK steel and action to tackle energy prices (very high in the UK) through price caps and public ownership of the grid. The unions also called for the Government to ‘take a stake’ when making public investments and workers be fully involved in the process of transition so that the introduction of new technologies is not ‘a smokescreen for job cuts’ (op cit p11). Yet union proposals for re-imagining the transition process have not been adopted at Tata, and there is no formal mechanism in the UK to compel employers to do so, and the blast furnaces have been closed without substantive transition plans for workers and the local community.

In the Rolls Royce green bargaining by unions has been more successful. Management has agreed on the need for ‘green’ skills and training to be integrated into medium-term plans to help the workforce develop skills that can be redeployed or be of value in the future labour market if the threat of redundancies becomes real. The development of alternative plans for production, which include specific proposals for decarbonising the plant whilst retaining and retraining workers, does represent new ground for UK unions in devising detailed

alternative ‘green’ proposals that draw on expertise on environmental issues from within and beyond the workforce.

Public sector unions have also adopted a focus on ‘green bargaining’. The university and college lecturers’ union, UCU, has developed a Green New Deal bargaining resource for its green reps and branches (UCU, 2023). A couple of university branches have submitted a Green New Deal bargaining claim with their employer jointly with other campus unions (usually UNISON, UNITE, GMB) and the students’ union. This focus on ‘green’ bargaining is replicated in Wales and Scotland. The TUC Wales Greener Workplaces Project supports unions to educate and train green reps to develop ‘transition’ agreements (Wales TUC, 2021). In 2022, the Scottish Government announced annual funding for the STUC of £100,000 to advance just transition through the recruitment of two new STUC policy officer roles ‘to coordinate worker engagement on just transition, amplify and share best practice and provide policy support’ (Scottish Government, 2022) Due to the perception that the formal mechanism of the Just Transition Commission was in danger of not delivering and the concept of just transition was at risk of becoming devoid of meaning, the activities of the STUC turned to focused on the workplace to build rep and worker capacity and engagement in just transition:

“Fundamentally, we want workers to pick this up in the workplace as part of discussions with their management. Essentially how you put some of this on the bargaining agenda as part of future proofing work. Whether or not that’s about climate impacts, flood, and rescue risks, all the rest of it, or whether or not it’s about transition issues for the workforce, train and support and investment and things like that.”

IV7_NGO

Despite this focus on employer bargaining, it is not possible to state with any authority how successful workplace reps have been in securing specific green agreements. Evidence to date suggests that these are limited (Zbyszewska and Pillon,

2020), although a lack of registration system for UK collective agreements means there is little systematic data available.

3.2.2 Intervention in the skills system

The UK skills system was noted above as a barrier to transition. This was highlighted in the collaboration between the campaign group Platform and RMT to understand the concerns of off-shore oil and gas workers in the North Sea. Job transitions, notably into off-shore wind, were being prevented by aspects of the training system and some exploitative practices. Oil and gas workers usually need to renew training accreditations every 4 years, but in the off-shore wind sector this is required every 2 years. Given most workers are self-employed, this is a direct cost to them. Their research identified that workers making this switch needed to pay considerable sums for new accreditations that often required very similar competencies to those they already had accredited. This barrier was attributed in part to the structure of the skills and accreditation system itself creating vested interests in keeping different accreditation requirements:

“The global wind organization are a non-profit outfit comprised of turbine manufacturers and owners and some developers like Orsted are resistant to having mutually recognized training qualifications with the offshore and gas sector so that workers can move smoothly between the industries and not incur any costs.”

IV22_Energy Union Officer

Platform and RMT have advocated for greater flexibility to enable workers to transition across sectors in the North Sea through initiatives such as ‘skills passports’. This enables the competencies of those leaving oil and gas to be recognised for work in other sectors (e.g., renewables). This proposal

has been accepted and is part of the workforce strategy contained within the recent North Sea sector deal¹² (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2022) and further embedded with public support from the DESNZ Minister, Ed Miliband, announcing that the Department would be a partner to the skills passport initiative. Although it is notable that this public recognition includes the industry bodies but not the unions and ENGOs that undertook the underlying research with workers and campaigned for the skills passport as a tool to facilitate oil and gas worker transitions into the renewables sector.

3.2.3 Embedding environmental capacity within the union

Within individual unions there have been notable developments to try and integrate climate and environment issues within union core demands and competencies, drawing on narratives of organising for a worker-led just transition and at times more expansive framings around addressing climate change. This includes embedding green reps within union rule-books, developing internal support structures and education and training. The largest manufacturing union, UNITE, developed an internal body, its ‘environmental taskforce’ chaired by the union’s head of education. This group drew together sector officers and union HQ education and policy research teams. Internal conferences were run to develop an ‘environment charter’ setting out the union’s environmental priorities which included establishing a suite of education programmes. The group has produced quarterly environment magazines as briefings for officers and reps (UNITE, 2021b). More recently the focus of UNITE’s activity has transferred to senior sector reps to advocate with employers and government for worker-led transitions. To support workplace negotiation and engagement, several unions have developed green rep networks and embedded training for green reps and members on

12 Initiated by the conservative administration the **North Sea Transition Deal** is a non-binding sector agreement between government and the North Sea oil and gas industry that focuses on four areas: supply decarbonisation; developing CCUS and hydrogen; supply chain transformation; aligning cross-sector energy training and standards to facilitate workforce mobility. The deal has been **criticised** by ENGOs for not tackling fossil fuel extraction effectively.

environmental issues (UNISON, UCU, UNITE, RMT, Community, NEU, FDA). The largest public sector union, UNISON, passed a motion in 2022 requiring all branches to recruit a green rep to their branch officer team (previously this had been advisory, but in 2022 became an expectation). Several unions have undertaken research with members on their attitudes towards climate change, climate policy and expectations of 'green' employment and skills change (Cutter et al., 2021; Trappmann and Cutter, 2022a, 2022b). This research highlights that union members are aware of the climate crisis and the need to act with urgency, understand that jobs and skills will need to change to meet the green transition but are not generally consulted by their employers on any expected changes at work.

In Wales there has been sustained activity to support the environmental education of workplace reps and members, supported by the government sponsored Welsh Union Learning Fund (WULF). This has supported UNISON Cymru, UNITE and NEU Cymru to develop education on just transition and environmental issues resources for workers. The National Education Union Cymru project also focused on training to teachers on 'powerful and positive skills for climate conversations' with pupils and other staff (Wales TUC, 2023, p. 24). The UK government funded Union Learning Fund (ULF) was established in 1998 and provided some initial programmes of environmental education and training for members in England. The ULF was discontinued as a national level funding source for unions in 2021. Some regional TUC teams have negotiated local funding to sustain environmental education for unions that was previously supported by the ULF. This has happened in the mayoral combined authorities of Sheffield and West Yorkshire – both Labour controlled - where some discretionary powers have been devolved for allocation of skills and adult education budgets.

3.2.4 Embedding worker focused just transition into local climate plans

In addition to developing specific practices to include just transition within workplace negotiations and build internal union capacity on climate and

environmental issues, UK unions have been engaging with other social actors to embed just transition principles within regional climate plans. The most advanced of these is in the Yorkshire and Humber (Y&H) region. The region has a high concentration of refineries, glass works, chemical production plants, power stations and other forms of heavy industry. In 2012, the Y&H TUC took part in an ETUC research programme exploring the jobs and skills implications of the energy transition in those regions of Europe producing the highest levels of CO2 emissions. Building on learnings from this, the regional TUC convened the Y&H TUC Low-Carbon Taskforce, an informal network of shop stewards and union officials in the 'high carbon' industries and external experts, to build awareness and union responses to the possible negative impacts (such as the closure of coal fired power-stations) and new employment opportunities (such as the expansion of off-shore renewable wind farms in the North Sea) of emerging climate mitigation plans. At the same time, in the absence of clarity of UK climate policy, regional bodies including universities and local authorities in the Y&H region looked to develop their own regional climate plan. The TUC became integral to the emerging Y&H Climate Commission (YHCC). The TUC regional secretary became a Commissioner and was successful in embedding Just Transition principles into the YHCC's Climate Plan. In order to take the employer engagement forward, Y&H TUC has secured funding from the European Climate Foundation to work with employers to encourage sign-up to the climate plan and within this support union-employer dialogue on climate transition planning.

In the absence of UK-level dialogue mechanisms, these examples illustrate ways in which UK unions have worked at the 'meso' level with other regional stakeholders seeking to address climate and just transition issues. This helps to raise awareness amongst unions and wider stakeholders of the variety of roles that unions could play in advocating for the interests of workers in the net zero transition, particularly in terms of jobs and skills. However, these efforts to develop the union role as advocates for worker interests and just transition with local

climate plans (where these exist) are not uniform across the UK and are, in some cases contested.

3.3 Contestation of just transition and climate action within the labour movement.

There is broad-based consensus on a number of central aspects of climate policy and just transition across the UK trade union movement. Notably, their advocacy for worker interests to be integrated in the rationale of climate politics, alongside demands for a more coherent and sustained green industrial policy and an employment and skills policy that can prepare workers for transition, supplemented with funding and time for training for workers and statutory rights for green reps. Yet within these broad areas of agreement, there are also some points of contestation, notably on decarbonisation pathways, but also on the dimensions of transition. These are explored here using Stevis and Fellis' (2020) framework for the analysis of just transition proposals, namely the scope of the transition envisioned (for whom), the scale at which it is sought (workplace, sectoral, national, global), and the depth at which the transformative policies proposed intervene into existing structures – whether the transition goal imagined is primarily a technological green transition or a more comprehensive socio-ecological transformation of society with much wider implications.

3.3.1 Decarbonisation pathways

Our account of UK unions' climate policy demands in section 2.9 already indicated that a key dimension of contestation centres on how decarbonisation should be achieved. The self-styled 'energy sector unions' generally articulate a preference for technological solutions, some with more force than others. From this perspective, there is frequent use of the term 'balanced energy policy' as a signifier for an approach to future electricity generation that is to be based not exclusively on 'green' renewable energy technologies (such as wind), but also on other technologies such as nuclear, blue-hydrogen and the continuation of some oil and gas extraction, at least in the medium term. This has been a point

of contention with other TUC affiliates. As one TUC official notes:

“I think the biggest disagreements are on the role of hydrogen for heating, the extent of the role of CCSU – although I think there’s less disagreement on that now – and on the role of nuclear energy in the energy mix.”

IV1_Union Federation Officer

These contestations become evident at national congresses, through the motions advanced and supported by different groupings of affiliates. As another TUC officer notes:

“We are a membership organisation and that matters... there’ve been big debates. You know, our [most contended] votes at Congress, have actually been on climate issues over the last few years. And, yeah, you know, nuclear power has been a pretty critical one on that. The TUC does have strong policy supporting nuclear power and that is driven by membership, basically.”

IV19_ Union Federation Officer

Differences in UK union environmental policy positions are not new (Farnhill, 2014), but the debates on the climate crisis have exemplified these contestations and intensified the delineation between different groupings in the UK labour movement. In 2017, there was apparent unity over climate action, summarised in a motion on climate change, public ownership of energy and Just Transition tabled by the bakers' union (BFAWU) where 'delegates unanimously backed what was arguably the most progressive stance the TUC has ever taken on climate change' (LRD, 2019, p. 5). The successful motion called for a programme of investigation by the TUC into divestment of union pension investments in fossil fuels, consultation with all affiliates on an industrial strategy in line with carbon reduction targets, a publicly funded housing retrofit, rights for green reps, and a just transition strategy 'for those workers affected by the industrial changes necessary to develop a



more environmentally sustainable future for all' (TUC, 2017). The following year, however, a motion tabled by GMB was successfully passed (and thus became new TUC policy), which rebutted the 2017 Congress position. The 2018 motion notes that just transition is 'a much-used but often ambiguous term and there is no shortage of voices who believe they are qualified to say what energy workers and communities want and need' (TUC, 2018, p.7). The 2018 motion emphasised that workers in the sectors most directly affected by climate transitions (and by extension, the unions representing them) should be central to these debates, namely GMB, Prospect, UNISON and UNITE. The motion stated that these workers 'should be paramount and central to the development of all TUC policies on energy, industrial strategy and climate change' and that 'the TUC should develop a political and lobbying strategy led by the voices and experience of energy unions and their members' (op cit) suggesting that the earlier framing of TUC policy was an attack on energy workers. In 2019 and in 2021, motions successfully tabled by the GMB have also made it TUC policy to again call for a 'balanced' energy policy that includes nuclear and gas as

a transition fuel, placed an emphasis on 'green' investment as jobs for UK workers and specific support for a just transition for workers in the gas industry. This positioning has led to climate activists within the union movement to directly challenge the stance of the 'energy union' leadership (Atkin, 2023; Latif, 2023b) as one that is regressive.

To some degree, this back and forth of policy debates can be seen as part of the nature of a politically diverse union movement, the power bases of union groupings with distinct sectional interests and, to some degree, the outcome of the inter-union 'horse trading' of votes that takes place at Congress over a number of complex issues (Farnhill, 2014). Congress decisions are significant as they set the direction of TUC policy and resources for the year and play a role in shaping the ongoing meaning of just transition both within the union movement and beyond it, for example, by setting some of the boundary conditions for the framing of just transition demands. These are explored further in terms of the different positions identified in the scope, scale and depth of transition proposed by UK unions.

3.3.2 Scope: A Just transition for whom?

The ‘energy sector unions’ (notably UNITE, Prospect, GMB) refer to the need for just transition policy to prioritise workers in the energy and ‘high carbon’ sectors. The workers included within this group are variously defined across different energy union policy statements, Congress motions and in our interviews: as oil and gas workers, workers in the nuclear sectors and also ‘high carbon emitting’ or ‘energy intensive users’ in manufacturing such as glass, chemicals and steel. A more generic statement from this perspective is given as follows:

“But my view [of just transition] is very worker focused, and it’s about the opportunity or the ability for workers to move their employment from high carbon sectors into low carbon sectors.”

IV2_Energy Union Officer

This point was reiterated by an official from another energy union who stressed that the process of transition was already underway for their members, here defined as energy sector workers and those also working in the ‘energy intensive’ sectors:

“So, it tends to be more for us in terms of a real, pressing issue. It’s the energy and high and energy intensive industries, because these are the ones who are at the forefront, and where energy policy is having a very direct and obvious impact...”

IV15_ Energy Union Officer

This perspective is directly criticised by others, including a rep in UNISON (a union that nationally has also allied itself with the ‘energy unions’ on Just Transition). The call from the energy unions for just transition policy to be focused upon energy or high carbon sector workers and the creation of ‘like for like’ jobs (see also below) is criticised for being too narrowly focused, particularly around the interests of male union members:

“But there’s that kind of notion, that the jobs that we’re going to create have to be dirty jobs, they have to be engineering jobs, and they have to be unionised

jobs, and they need to be well-paid jobs. Well, but they don’t have to be in those kinds of sectors. They can be in the service sector; they can be in education and stuff like that. So, they think about it in those kinds of male-dominated roles.... but it’s all come back to, ‘These guys need to be given a decent, a proper job, not an airy-fairy kind of job.’ But if those airy-fairy jobs were better paid, they would be much more attractive, wouldn’t they?”

IV10_Other Union Officer

This illustrates how respondents from the public sector and education unions have more expansive definitions of the scope of just transition and also express concern that the current framing privileges male workers. They also stress that the implications of climate mitigation and the transition needed to meet climate targets will affect many if not all sectors of the economy, and consequently just transition policy needs to ensure that workers (male and female) across these sectors are actively engaged. These unions argue that their members also face change within their jobs and that they will be part of the solution in delivering climate mitigation and adaptation through public administration and education. As one education union respondent noted:

“So, it’s not just bringing the industrial unions or carbon heavy industries, every sector will have to have some kind of just transition process to meet the challenges of the climate crisis. So, what does that look like in education, in post-16 education specifically, and for our members”

This officer continued:

“I went to COP as a delegate for the ITUC ... and the just transition debate was dominated by industrial sector unions ... I was at pains to say, but all sectors are going to need to have a just transition conversation for workers because it is going to fundamentally change the way that we all work and operate.”

IV14_Other Union Officer

Public sector unions were more likely to mention that the scope for just transition should be inclusive of but also beyond the workplace to encompass local communities (and also the global scale). One respondent from UNISON explained this in terms of the influence union reps can have on climate debates through both workplace negotiations and in dialogue with communities:

“I think for our remit (it is) ... recognising that that’s not just a worker-employer dynamic. But because for my understanding of just transition is the recognition that if the community, nation and wider.... If they’re not willing to come along on that journey, then we won’t make it to the end ... So for us, a particular area that we can add value in is enabling our members to be active in those community and employer negotiations.”

IV18_Other Union Officer

An officer from a public sector union also noted how a community framing was important when discussing just transition to consider the wider impacts of transition beyond the workers directly affected:

“And we’ve always rooted that in communities as well. So, it’s not just about one group of workers. The most obvious one is North Sea oil and gas and what that means for [those] workers compared to what it may mean for people doing other roles in the community as well.”

IV5_Other Union Officer

In contrast to advocating for the scope of just transition policy to be discussed in terms of sectors and occupations within them, others argue that ‘justice’ within a just transition should focus upon precarious workers. The targets for policy should not be defined by the sector in which they operate, but in relation to their precarity in the labour market. As one rep from Prospect noted, a just transition should:

“Not simply [be] swapping like for like and protecting guys that earn 100 grand in oil and gas, which we should be doing as well, but how we

use what we’re doing in transition to reskill those workers that are losing out because of changes to working practices and upskill and give them better chances to grow into jobs which are going to pay more.”

IV3_Energy Union Officer

3.3.3 Scale: Local, national or international?

Another dimension of diverging views concerns the scale at which a just transition should be articulated. For some, emphasis is placed upon workplace, with, for example, a TUC officer noting that there is scope to advance worker interests through initiatives such as workers on boards [IV22] or by others through negotiating just transition agreements with employers [IV24, IV2, IV3, IV11]. Others frame transition issues at the national scale in arguments made for retaining ‘green jobs’ in the UK and the need for industrial policy to recognise this. For example, GMB tabled a successful motion at the 2019 TUC Congress entitled ‘Securing UK green jobs’ (TUC, 2019b) which noted ‘Local labour in construction: anybody awarding energy construction contracts in the UK to be legally required to include local labour clauses in those contracts’ (p37). Similar issues have been made in Scotland, with unions demanding that lessons be learned regarding the loss of manufacturing jobs in the offshore-wind supply chain. This, they suggest, should be addressed through a stronger government role in demanding a preference for local contractors and employment when commissioning green projects.

In addition to considering local communities, public sector unions were also more likely to place an emphasis on the global dimensions of just transition. An education union officer reflected on this concept of just transition in the following way:

“So, I think it is for all workers, to be as global as that, it is going to be an issue that impacts on all of us.”

IV14_Other Union Officer

Similarly,

“I think we’re very conscious that we recognise, and we’ve put this into our framing that, whatever this transition is, it takes account of Global South impacts in the strategies.”

IV5_Other Union Officer

This is also reflected in the comments from a senior TUC Officer who notes that the global is an important dimension when considering transitions. Notably, however, there is a qualification that while climate impacts must be considered at the global scale, the impact of climate mitigation policy is more likely to be relevant at the national level, they observe:

“It is important to keep the global perspective in that we tend to talk about it last. But .. you know, we are part of the ITUC, you know, the just transition centre and the perspective that just transition applies globally as well as nationally I think is a really important one.... I suppose you can think about both the impacts of climate and the impacts of climate mitigation. And I guess often the kind of impacts of climate come out most in kind of discussions on the global framework basically. And the impacts of mitigation tend to come out in the national framework.”

IV19_Union Federation Officer

This final comment illustrates that conceptions of the scale at which just transition should be focused are not mutually exclusive and can operate across different levels. The narrative of UK ‘green’ jobs is a recurring theme, primarily amongst manufacturing unions, placing more emphasis on the national level: a focus which might be expected where jobs are more likely to be at risk from international competition.

Stavis and Felli’s just transition framework (2020) includes the temporal dimension within their conception of scale. Evidence from the document analysis and interviews reveals that the pace of change is also contested. One energy union respondent recognised that workers in fossil fuel

extraction industries are aware that their industries have a ‘finite lifetime’ (IV15) and suggested that a planning horizon is needed for workers over a 10- to 15-year period. Other UK unions, such as PCS and UCU, in contrast call for a more immediate end to fossil fuel extraction and ally with long-established climate and anti-nuclear campaigns within and outside the labour movement (IV5, IV10, IV14). Yet the energy unions contest this approach. GMB officers talk about the risk to workers posed by ‘a poorly timed transition’ and states that they ‘cannot endorse rushed targets for these industries, nor vague promises of retraining for jobs that do not exist’ (GMB 2021, 9–10). Although stated less clearly in formally published documents, UNITE also expects oil and gas production to continue for the foreseeable future and one representative commented that ‘it does not have a policy to end exploration in the North Sea’ [IV9_Energy Union Officer].

Echoing the reflections of the Scottish Just Transition Commission (that just transition could be seen to be an empty promise if not backed up by policies and practices that embed its core objectives), another union officer noted that union demands need to be tempered with a degree of realism about the promise of green jobs and opportunities for workers in the energy transition:

“What people see is jobs in computers, they see graduate jobs coming, but they don’t necessarily see the jobs that go into working class communities, and that for many people leaves them frozen out... and there’s less opportunities that come to them... and so far the green agenda has failed them”.

IV15_Energy Union Officer

This perception that decarbonisation policies do not have sufficiently well formulated mechanisms to deliver good quality working class ‘green jobs’ and how this can inhibit union support for decarbonisation policies and the promotion of a just transition narrative with members is explored further in section 3. A UNITE interviewee from another industrial sector also

indicated that they were unwilling to promote the idea of a just transition if there were no clear plans and negotiated agreements in place for those workers facing change, commenting:

“Why would we, as a trade union, lead workers into a transition where we know there’s going to be a cliff edge? We won’t do that?”

IV27_Energy Union Officer

The scale and pace of transition is perhaps less openly contested between UK unions than the definition of scope, yet these elements present additional dimensions of difference in the way just transition is expressed as a union goal. As we see now below, there is also a considerable difference in the ways that the depth of transition (or transformation) is articulated.

3.3.4 Depth: transition or transformation?

In practice, just transition on a global scale requires strategies to reduce overall energy demand in countries like the UK especially amongst wealthier segments of society. These demands are potentially much more far-reaching in their transformational implications than the technology-centred ‘green economy’ framing that many public and governmental debates are based on. Yet there are significant differences among unions in how far they are embracing this insight and making it the basis of their policies. Some union respondents overtly express a vision for the ‘destination’ of the just transition as transformative, as one national officer noted:

“So, we do frame this as a just transformation. So, it’s not about an overtly economic transition, or just the sort of ‘green job swaps’ capitalist transition. So yeah, we are fundamentally saying this is about socialism and changing how our society works. Across the board.”

IV5_Other Union Officer

Likewise, some interviewees were seeing the climate and other concurrent crises as an

opportunity to connect struggles through a more systemic framing that could provide greater leverage for a ‘deeper’, more radical decarbonisation agenda. Respondents noted, however, that in practice, the cost-of-living and energy crises had been prioritised over climate debates:

“The trade unions are not pressing for that kind of stuff either, because it comes down their list of priorities. All the talk is about cost of living, without connecting that cost-of-living crisis to the climate crisis.”

IV10_Other Union Officer

Others commented on what they perceived as the reticence of some parts of the UK union movement to engage with such transformative ideas because of the challenges this poses to established frames of union action. For example, the case for a reduction in energy demand are important climate mitigation strategies but perceived by some unions as jeopardising economic growth which remains a core conceptual frame around which bargaining for worker’s fair share of those gains takes place (see for example UNITE, 2022b). This position was described by one union officer in the following terms:

“They [manufacturing unions] would talk about [fuel poverty] more in terms of Ofgem and the pricing structures of energy. But they didn’t talk about it in terms of home insulation or, homegrown energy that would be more secure and cheaper... [...] They didn’t really want to go to demand reduction. [...] . It’s not just degrowth. It’s about can we actually imagine a good world where we use less energy and unions just find that unintuitive, I think.”

IV4_Union Federation Officer

Respondents from manufacturing unions counter that they are not rejecting the possibility of transformation. The following comment from an energy union officer documents the view that there is already a transformation taking place that will result in broader socio-ecological change. This



transformation, however, is seen as more of an ongoing process that unions are facing and need to moderate, rather than as something that could be their own project, and it is qualified with a primary emphasis placed on transitions for workers and upholding their terms and conditions. In this sense, the demand is for transformed employment relations where workers have a stronger role within the process of sector and job transitions:

“But yeah, equally, there will be a social ecology, there will be a transformation, but that transformation has to come in a way that is for us, that protects the integrity of those people’s jobs if the industries are gonna evolve, they evolve with workers at the heart and an inception of that change.”

IV9_Energy Union Officer

The discussion above has presented the union debate in terms of competing perspectives on just transition, broadly delineated between the ‘energy’ unions and other, mainly public sector unions. Yet our findings also illustrate that contestation on climate and just transition exists not only between unions but also within them. Several respondents, including those from within the ‘energy unions’ cluster and others, note that there are a range of different positions within their unions – most notably within the larger conglomerate unions (UNISON, UNITE, GMB) that have a broad spectrum of membership constituencies. One respondent noted the contention within UNITE over the focus of climate and just transition activity in the work of the union’s Environmental Taskforce [IV27] and the emergence of a ‘climate caucus’ of activists within the union that proposed an unsuccessful Fossil Fuel motion to the Union’s 2023 Congress [IV20]. The motion demanded that the union stops supporting fossil fuel

extraction and new oil and gas licences, review its support for ‘false solutions’ such as blue hydrogen and to work with climate justice organisations rather than with industry lobbyists to research sustainable alternatives. The ‘climate caucus’ motion was defeated and led the national executive of the union to issue a strongly worded statement on the motion at Conference centring the debate on the demands for workplace bargaining by noting:

“Just transition will not result from unilateral calls for job losses or the immediate end to any industry. Our demand is for credible transition plans creating like-for-like jobs or better which are endorsed and led by workers in these industries.”

UNITE Executive Council, UNITE 2023b

Within one union, elections for senior officers might have led to more progressive environmental positions being downgraded if the candidate from one faction had been elected [IV22]. This did not happen, but it illustrates the vulnerability of the climate agenda to internal union politics. National officers in another union note that the energy sector group within the union has developed specific positions (on nuclear) and political activities (such as being in direct dialogue with the Labour Party around its climate policy) that do not reflect the standpoint of the union as a whole (as determined through its democratic decision making via Congress) [IV17]. These intra-union tensions illustrate the contingency of specific positions within the UK labour movement but also illustrate that there is support for more radical proposals and positions more in line with those of climate movements both with parts of the leadership of some unions and among members from below.

3.3.5 Qualifying conditions for a just transition

In addition to the consideration of scope, scale and depth of transition, there are subtle differences in emphasis that potentially set different boundary conditions for negotiations around what constitutes a just transition. The TUC’s Just Transition statement of 2019 places an emphasis on the creation of ‘good jobs’ in the green economy,

drawing on the notion of equivalence with what currently constitutes good working conditions in industrial sectors, notably “union recognition, decent pay, terms and conditions, high standards of health and safety and a fair pension” (TUC, 2019 p9). This position is reflected in a comment made by one officer from an energy union:

“It’s about the opportunity or the ability for workers to move their employment from high carbon sectors into low carbon sectors. But on the basis that those are good quality jobs that they’re moving to.... it is very much a worker focused, good jobs perspective that I have.”

IV2_Energy Union Officer

The quotation from the UNITE executive council above also suggests that industrial unions place an emphasis on the creation of ‘like-for-like’ jobs in the ‘green’ economy. Yet some of the energy unions (GMB and the oil and gas section in Unite) are making stricter demands to defend existing energy sector jobs and for their members to face ‘no-detriment’. In the UNITE policy congress debate of 2023, a national executive member in manufacturing called for ‘collective bargaining and the principle of defending every job’ (UNITE, 2023). Similarly, this ‘jobs first’ approach is reflected in GMB’s demands that, ‘policymakers’ first priority should be to achieve a transition that avoids job losses wherever possible’. (GMB, 2023, p. 2)

This stronger emphasis on protecting those in existing energy sector jobs is not surprising coming from unions with a large number of members potentially negatively affected by climate mitigation policy. This position does not deny that transition will take place and that support for workers in making a transition, such as training and local bargaining, are also important. Yet it is significant to note that this emphasis on job retention potentially narrows the space for dialogue on just transition by setting a more stringent set of necessary conditions on the process and pace of change.

Yet interviewees also noted that UK unions need to carefully consider the way that they engage with climate change and the type of policies they advocate through closer engagement with members on these complex issues. As one national officer commented, the union movement needs to continue to develop a clear sense of the concerns of workers:

“There’s no end of indicators that we need to take action. And people are not stupid. They can see that. Who’s going to pay for it is a key issue. Particularly when people are really struggling with cost of living, increased housing prices, food costs, all of that. This can’t be a middle-class agenda. It’s got to be for everybody..... I can’t be in a position of telling them that they’re wrong. We have to be listening to them. And I don’t think we’re doing enough of that.”

V2_Energy Union Officer

3.4 Conclusion: How Just Transition is interpreted in the UK

The exploration of just transition statements, practices and contestations in this section has highlighted key features of the way in which just transition is interpreted by unions in the UK. The climate demands of UK unions are put forward broadly within an eco-modernist framing (Barca, 2019; Trappmann and Cutter, 2024), centred around the prime concern of supporting workers in adapting to the greening of the economy and the new technologies that this requires. This approach is not without its critics, predominantly among those within the public sector unions (and some within the larger conglomerate unions) who argue for a more transformational climate politics. These contestations are ongoing both within and between unions. The picture of alliances and contestation within the UK labour movement can be understood mainly (but not exclusively) in terms of sectional interests, which is not unique to UK unions (see for example Hrynshyn and Ross, 2011; Thomas and Doerflinger, 2020). Yet, a broad overall picture emerges from the position adopted by the TUC

which as a union confederation body with limited powers and less resource than its larger affiliates, must both accommodate diverse positions and locate its action within the parameters broadly set through the democratic processes of Congress.

The case made by industrial unions to set the terms of the debate on just transition policy as expressed through TUC Congress has been partially but not wholly successful. They have been able to persist with their demands for a ‘balanced energy policy’ that encompasses a broad range of energy solutions, including the continuation of some (abated) fossil fuel production. Yet the call by energy unions, notably GMB, for the scope of just transition policy to centre only those workers in the ‘higher carbon’ sectors is not reflected in the language and activities of the TUC’s work on just transition, which on the whole is more inclusive. Although it is notable that under the new Labour administration the creation of the Office for Clean Energy Jobs within DESNZ suggests that the creation of new institutions to support the worker transition is being focused on energy sector jobs. Whether this includes consideration of workers making the transition out of fossil fuel sectors into cleaner energy jobs is not yet clear.

In terms of the scale of just transition policy, while there is a degree of rhetoric around the need to encompass the concerns of workers globally, in practice, just transition activities predominantly focus on workplaces and local or regional communities. The TUC continues to demand that there be some form of national governance around Just Transition. There has been some rapprochement in terms of the Labour government’s reengagement with the TUC via TUSDAC, this does not meet the TUC’s broader demand for a national just transition commission. More proactive approaches to just transition have developed with the administrations in the devolved nations and some regions where there are different opportunity structures, such as left-leaning political leadership and some, though limited, devolved powers on environment and skills policy, that have helped enable union engagement. But even in these contexts, the union role in just transition policy and practice is contested by other stakeholders and

needs continuous renewal – at times problematic for the TUC and trade unions which have limited resources at the regional level. A central emphasis continues to be placed on workplace negotiations and building capacity within the union to integrate ‘just transition’ demands within collective bargaining. This has been boosted by new TUC officer roles with a specific sectoral focus (automotive, steel, construction and chemicals) to help boost negotiation between workers and management on climate transition topics.

While this emphasis on the workplace could be seen as business as usual for UK unions, the just transition dialogues reported between unions and management in some companies (see section 3.2.1) are proactive and place a focus on medium to long term issues of both employment and in a few cases on greening production systems. This contrasts to the traditional role of UK unions that tends to be mainly reactive to management. Just Transition activities have raised questions about companies’ climate plans and the range of ways that these might impact on workers (jobs, skills, adaptation etc.) beyond a relatively narrow focus on environmental standards compliance. Interesting initiatives, such as building local alliances to address housing retrofit, illustrate a degree of experimentation, seeking solutions to the climate challenge that can bring benefits for both workers and communities. These and other cases illustrate one of the most interesting findings from the British case, namely that the lack of national or sectoral institutions that could form the basis of union-management (and state) dialogue on climate and just transitions has driven UK unions and others to experiment with ‘work arounds’ that could develop into a new and interesting role for the labour movement. Yet these innovations are new territory for unions and require considerable shifts both in unions’ capacity to work locally and in the mindsets of all those involved in a context where union legitimacy and collective approaches to employment and skills have been under attack for over four decades.

The vision for just transition with reference to a transformational politics is rooted in term of a vision of greater social justice. There is less evidence of

a vision for a ‘deep transformation’ as described in Stevis and Felli’s (2020, p.4) framework that moves from ethno- to eco-centrism and seeks to balance the demands for justice between humanity and nature. Some attempts to connect ‘every-day’ concerns with concerns for the environment are evident, for example, in connecting the cost-of-living and energy crises directly to the climate agenda. In this vein, the TUC and affiliates have proposed policies on the need for an approach which links the climate crisis to other structural problems within the UK economy (Wales TUC, 2020; TUC, 2022, 2023a). One officer explained:

“So, the energy one is the easiest one to talk about; people making money from an energy supply distribution transmission all the way through. But I think we’ve also been able to look into trying to communicate more about food security and the impact that we’re seeing on inflation from food prices going up, partly tied into supply issues and weather patterns change.”

IV25_Union Federation Officer

Unions in the devolved administrations have had more direct experience of engagement with government efforts to develop multi-actor dialogue on just transition. In Wales, these arrangements are still forming. In Scotland, where unions and ENGOs led the way on just transition, unions are expressing doubts as to whether the machinery of (devolved) government can realise just transition ambitions, citing the lack of detailed planning and well-defined pathways for decarbonisation. As one unionist in Scotland noted:

“Having embedded the concept as a high-level goal, just transition should from here on be used to describe a detailed and specific set of policies, actions and investments that further tangible progress along a well-defined pathway. Use of just transition as a “fix-all” term without specific policies and actions to actually realise it must be avoided from now on.”

IV3_Energy Union Officer

The interpretation of just transition and climate policy demands of UK unions is, perhaps inevitably, refracted through the lens of established union concerns around jobs, skills and training, but also social justice and political agendas around public ownership (or at least anti-privatisation). There has been a notable assertion of the role that unions and workers in the industrial and public sectors can play in addressing the transition to net zero. While there are elements of a more transformational politics, these are not 'eco-social' in the sense that the needs of the environment are balanced with those of social justice.

Ultimately, the TUC position on climate mitigation is, by necessity, one of 'hedging' (Thomas and

Doerflinger, 2020) as transformative debate is closed down by the unions with members in the energy sectors who claim the right to be the central voices of just transition policy-making - both because of the members most immediately affected and through workers underpinning knowledge of their jobs and how they could transition to meet climate targets. The assertion of the role of the public sector is an interesting development - especially as public sector members are the largest constituency within the UK movement. Unions allying themselves to the energy union grouping, unions such as UNITE and GMB, also have considerable public sector memberships and the review of just transition across and within UK unions shows that the position of the UK labour



movement on climate issues, rather than being fixed, is vigorously contested both from below and at the leadership levels.

UK unions are potentially 'in from the cold' in terms of public policy making on climate transitions and some of the new Labour governments' approach to policy is more inclusive, interventionist and resonant with union demands notably for public ownership to drive the transition. But there is still no clear mechanism to drive worker engagement in the UK's climate transition. Within these developments the scale, scope depth and pace of transition remain contested between UK unions, although this has also led to a degree of vibrancy in seeking pragmatic solutions for workers, the lack of embeddedness of UK unions in wider employment

relations institutions provides a set of 'weak ties' that enable experimentation and a variety of local initiatives, but many of these remain vulnerable and the internal tensions over the longer term direction of worker transitions remain unresolved.

Within the voluntarist systems of UK industrial relations, union responses have (re-)turned to the workplace to emphasise more adversarial 'worker-led' transition plans that primarily focus on workplace transitions. In the absence of wider sectoral or social dialogue mechanisms, the consensus needed to drive a consistent and clear longer-term vision of a just transition for workers and communities remains lacking.



4.

Annex A: Interview List

Interview number	Interview type
1	Union Federation Officer
2	Energy Union Officer
3	Energy Union Officer
4	Union Federation Officer
5	Other Union Officer
6	NGO
7	NGO
8	Government
9	Energy Union Officer
10	Other Union Officer
11	Energy Union Officer
12	Union Federation Officer
13	Other Union Officer
14	Other Union Officer
15	Energy Union Officer
16	Union Federation Officer
17	Other Union Officer
18	Other Union Officer
19	Union Federation Officer
20	Energy Union Officer
21	Energy Union Officer
22	Energy Union Officer
23	Union Federation Officer
24	Union Federation Officer
25	Union Federation Officer
26	Union Federation Officer
27	Energy Union Officer

Energy Union Officer = 9

Other Union Officer = 6

Union Federation Officer = 9

Government = 1

NGOs = 2

5.

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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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Find out more

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