

Québec Case Report Just Transition in Québec

By Mélanie Laroche (CRIMT, Université de Montréal), Jonathan Michaud (CRIMT, Université de Montréal), and Éric Pineault (ISE, UQÀM)

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1. Introduction



This report focuses on **engagement by Trade Unions** in the province of Québec, Canada on climate change issues and how more generally they contribute to Just Transition. By exploring the structure of labour and climate policies, we seek to **identify the levers available** to unions in the fight against climate change.

In doing so, we highlight the tensions that exist within the industrial relations system and within union organizations around just transition issues.

In Québec, trade unions made the shift towards just transition in the years leading up to the Paris Agreement and have since taken up its definition. They were critical players in the coalitions that led to the social consensus in Québec's for a strong decarbonization trajectory. These coalitions were created in the wake of environmental conflicts around fossil fuel extractive infrastructure projects between 2010 and 2021 when Québec passed a law banning the future extraction of oil and gas on its territory and cancelling any existing licences or permits to explore and extract. Union participation in these coalitions was instrumental to their success. Today, the main challenges in implementing decarbonisation are centred on the electrification of industry and transport, which means that workers will have to adapt to new technical processes and new technologies. The transition is therefore essentially driven by issues relating to the training of workers, the match between training and employment and the search for investment to guarantee jobs.

The Québec case is interesting for a number of reasons. As a province in the Canadian federation, the Québec government has extensive decisional power over labour issues and laws, environmental and economic policy. Climate policy is a shared jurisdiction in Canada between the federal state and provinces. As a core member of BOGA, the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance, Québec is among the more ambitious provinces in Canada and among jurisdictions in North America. Its cap and trade carbon market, now linked to California, has been in operation since 2013. Québec's energy mix is also quite unique, electricity production is almost entirely decarbonized (98%) and close to 50% of its overall energy mix is from renewable sources. All fossil sources of energy are imported into the province, from Canada and the United States (Whitemore et al, 2025). Québec, in contradistinction to the rest of Canada, does not have a fossil fuel extractive sector to wind down.

Québec's climate policy is a hybrid between federal engagements and objectives and specific policies taken by the Québec government. Both Canada and Québec have Paris Agreement net zero 2050 and GHG reduction 2030 targets, the 2050 target is legally binding in both cases. Current intermediary objectives are: Canada « at least 40-45% below 2005 by 2030, and Québec « 37,5% below 1990 by 2030. The province of Québec has as an implementation mechanism a "Plan for a green economy" (PEV) launched by the government in 2021. The plan rests on a combination of carbon pricing, regulation of the carbon intensity of specific sectors (transport, industry, energy), financial support for investments in low-carbon processes and decarbonization, as well as energy efficiency.

Like most states of the global North, Québec's climate policies are also enacted through a green investments policy. Here we find the usual mix of subsidies, tax breaks and loan guarantees offered directly by the State or by state-controlled entities such as "Investissements Québec". What clearly sets Québec apart from other jurisdictions is access to cheap, reliable clean energy, which can be considered a very strong incitement to invest. Québec's industrial electricity rates have been approximately 4–6 cents per kilowatt-hour (kWh), whereas industrial rates in Ontario, New York, and California can range from 10 to 15 cents per kWh or more. Future capacity in Québec, mainly coming from wind and to a lesser degree solar, will also be highly competitive. Because it is controlled by the State through Hydro-Québec, a public utility, the allocation of this power is a core component of industrial policy in Québec (Whitemore et al, 2025). New power can be allocated in three different directions, and this will have a significant impact on transition in Québec. It can be used to decarbonize existing uses of energy, both in industry and among households and institutions, it can be exported as a substitute for coal-based power, which happens in New York and Massachusetts, helping these states attain their climate objectives, and finally it can be used to attract new industries looking for clean sources of energy. The current Québec government clearly prefers the latter option, compatible with its vision of transition as a green growth opportunity.

In order to demonstrate the trajectory of Québec's trade union organizations with regard to just transition, we first present the climate policies adopted in that province (section 2). We emphasize the role of unions in developing these policies, and describe the main spaces they use to influence decision-makers on just transition. We then turn to the debates and the various initiatives of Québec trade union organisations on just transition (section 3). We highlight the positions of the various unions on the climate crisis and the just transition, and present the many coalitions in which they are active on these issues. This section also looks at the social dialogue institutions used by Québec unions to promote their interests in the face of the climate crisis.



2. Labour and climate policy in country



2.1 Field of climate policy

2.1.1 The formal policy process

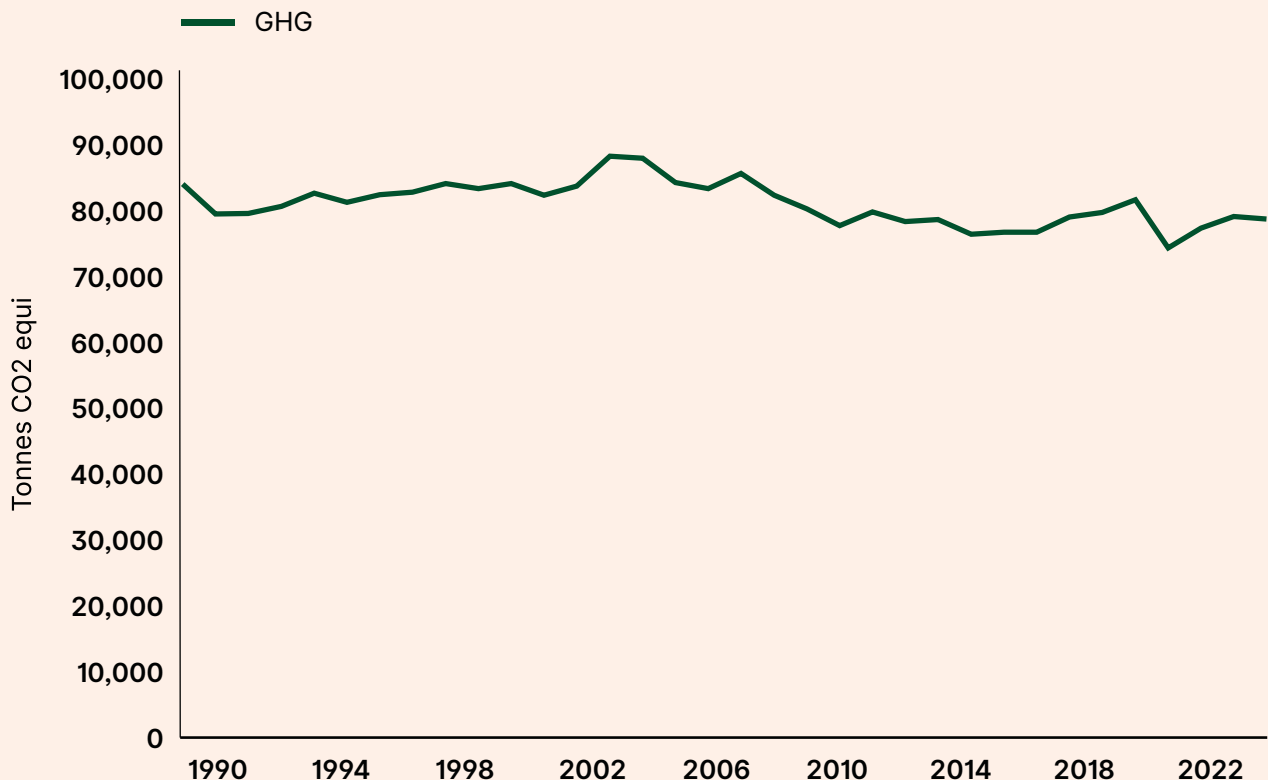
From the moment climate change emerged as a political concern on the international stage, Québec, like many other subnational governments, recognized its intermestic nature and the constitutional competencies and responsibilities it entailed. This recognition legitimized Québec's international actions in this domain. This was reinforced by what is called the Gérin-Lajoie doctrine in Québec stating that the provincial government must assert their jurisdiction in international matters (Chaloux et al., 2020).

In April 2001, the National Assembly of Québec (the province's parliament) took a significant step by unanimously adopting a motion supporting the Kyoto Protocol, urging the Canadian federal

government to ratify it and implement measures outlined in a national action plan on climate change (Chaloux et al., 2020). Five years later, in 2006, the Québec government launched a provincial climate change action plan, emphasizing its commitment to implementing the Kyoto Protocol within its jurisdiction (Chaloux 2017). This plan aimed for a 6% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2012 and included measures across all economic sectors, such as transportation, energy, agriculture, waste management, and industry. As can be seen in figure 1 below this rather modest target was attained as emissions followed a downward trend from 2004 to 2014, emission levels have stabilized thereafter at around 80 000 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent per year. One could actually argue that after a peak in 2004, the variance of GHG emissions in Québec is better explained by the GDP growth rate than by climate policies.

Figure 1: GHG emissions for Québec 1990 - 2022

Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada (2024) National Inventory Report 1990-2022: Greenhouse Gas Sources and Sinks in Canada.



At the Copenhagen Conference of Parties (COP15) on climate in 2009, the government of Québec announced a more ambitious reduction target of 20% below 1990 levels by 2020, aligning its climate policies with those of the European Union. This was established through Order in Council (#1187-2009) and was followed by legislation in May 2009 amending Québec's Environmental Quality Act to provide the necessary legal framework to implement a cap-and-trade system for GHG emissions (De Lassus Saint-Geniès, 2017). Parliamentary consultations during the legislative process showed political support for both targets and the cap-and-trade system across existing party lines and from most social actors, including business, the environmental movement and labour (Séguin et al., 2019). The carbon market would be the principle regulatory mechanism put in place to achieve the emission reduction targets. It included both a price and ceiling on 85% of carbon emissions in Québec and creating a fund from the proceeds of the market to finance decarbonization initiatives. The regulation establishing the market was adopted in 2012 and came into force on January 1, 2013 creating the "Système de plafonnement et d'échange de droits d'émission (SPEDE)." In 2014, Québec linked its cap-and-trade program with similar system in California, creating the largest carbon market in North America managed by sub-national governments from different countries (Séguin et al., 2019). In 2016 the Québec legislative assembly adopted by decree a commitment to the Paris Agreement and set a new target which is still in force today at 37.5% below 1990 levels by 2030. Again this received wide support by all major parties in the parliament and among social actors.

A particularity of the achievement of consensus around GHG reduction targets in Québec is the use of COP meetings to discuss the degree of ambition. Québec tends to send large delegations to COP's, business groups, environmental NGO's and labour federation delegates use the opportunity of the COP to informally negotiate climate policy with government representatives and find consensus. The isolated and intimate context of COP delegations creates a space of opportunity for these discussions and eases a "para" neocorporatist negotiated process. It helps that there are no significant fossil fuel interests among delegates from Québec (Séguin et al., 2019).

In 2019, the newly elected Québec government launched an important legislative process that led to a reinforcement of its climate policy. Bill No. 44, officially titled *An Act mainly to ensure effective governance in the fight against climate change and to promote electrification* was officially adopted in November 2020 after extensive consultations[1]. The bill sought to reinforce governance and accountability in achieving the Paris agreement target. Consultations involved environmental groups, industry representatives, trade unions, and research institutions. These discussions focused on the feasibility of the proposed GHG reduction targets, the mechanisms required to achieve them, and their economic implications. Environmental organizations advocated for more ambitious reduction goals, whereas industry stakeholders emphasized the need for economic flexibility and gradual implementation. The establishment of GHG targets was informed by scientific studies and economic impact assessments. Reports from government agencies and independent research bodies provided data on emission sources, reduction strategies, and potential economic consequences of stricter regulations. Finally, the labour movement supported the establishment of targets on the basis of a progressive ideological orientation which entails environmentalism, but insisted that policies be implemented in a way that protects workers and mitigates economic disruptions.

Tables below present issues and concerns that were voiced during these consultations based on a summary analysis of the memoirs presented by these groups. Table 1 and 2 summarize different perspectives that emerged among all groups, table 3 focuses on specific interventions by some important trade unions.

Table 1: Summary of some stakeholders and their contributions

Sector	Examples of Organizations	Contributions / Positions
Environmental Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Équiterre • Greenpeace Québec • David Suzuki Foundation • Other local environmental protection groups 	They advocated for ambitious measures to reduce GHG emissions and protect natural habitats. They called for a rapid energy transition and a reduction in the use of fossil fuels.
Industrial Sector and Businesses*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hydro-Québec (a major player in the electricity sector) • Québec Chamber of Commerce • Sector-specific associations related to energy or transportation 	They expressed concerns regarding economic competitiveness, the investment costs associated with electrification, and the need to balance climate innovation with long-term economic viability.
Unions and Workers' Representatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) • Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ) 	They stressed the necessity of integrating social and employment dimensions into the energy transition. They called for measures in training, retraining, and protection for workers in sectors affected by the transition.
Indigenous and Community Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various local Indigenous groups and councils • Representatives of concerned First Nations 	They underscored the importance of respecting Indigenous rights and traditional knowledge in implementing climate policies, and insisted that sustainable development projects consider the impacts on their territories and ways of life.

Table 2: Positions on GHG targets

Stakeholder	Position on the GHG Target	Main Arguments
Environmental Groups	Advocated for more ambitious targets (up to 50% reduction by 2030).	Argued that 37.5% was insufficient to meet Québec's share of global climate responsibility. Pushed for stricter regulations and sectoral emissions limits.
University and Research Institutions	Supported the 37.5% target but called for stronger implementation mechanisms.	Emphasized the need for clear roadmaps, data transparency, and sector-specific pathways (e.g., transport, industry, housing).
Industry and Business Representatives	Expressed concerns about the economic impact of the target.	Warned that overly aggressive targets could hurt competitiveness and investment. Asked for flexibility and financial support to adapt.
Trade Unions	Supported climate action but called for worker protections.	Stressed the importance of job retraining and financial support for sectors in transition.
Indigenous and Community Organizations	Demanded stronger participation in decision-making.	Highlighted the need for sustainable development that respects Indigenous rights and land use.

Table 3: Trade Union Interventions

Union	Main Concerns	Proposed Solutions
Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of job losses due to energy transition • Need for strong worker protections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government-funded retraining programs • Job transition plans for workers in fossil fuel industries
Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic impact of climate policies on workers • Social inequalities in the transition process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced policies to avoid negative economic consequences • Social programs to support affected workers
Other Labor Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring fair wages and employment security in new green sectors • The role of unions in shaping labor policies in a low-carbon economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased union participation in climate policy discussions • Long-term planning for industrial transition



2.1.2 The political economy of the climate policy process

As discussed above Canadian province, Québec enjoys a strong degree of autonomy in the formulation of climate policies. This autonomy is further strengthened by important differences between the political economy of Canada and the political economy of Québec, which can be summarized by two factors mentioned above:

1. Canada's political economy is dominated by the extraction and export of hydrocarbons, oil and gas in particular (Carroll, 2021), on the other hand the province of Québec banned by law the extraction of fossil fuels in 2021.
2. As shown earlier, Québec's energy mix contains a much higher proportion of renewable energy than Canada's, which resembles that of most fossil fuel-dependent advanced capitalist economies, with renewables at 23% of primary energy use.

This has important consequences for climate policies in Québec. Québec can tangentially be more ambitious than Canada in its climate goals and engagements because it is less economically dependent on fossil fuel extraction. But, Québec does not have the same low-hanging fruits as other

Canadian provinces. To make substantial reductions, Québec must undertake harder efforts to abate emissions from sectors such as industrial processes and transport.

Whereas the field of climate policymaking at the federal level in Canada is structured by contradictory forces – on the one hand, a nominally environmentally progressive state and on the other, the imperatives of a strong fossil capital sector –, these forces are absent in Québec (Carter, 2020). The result of these forces in Canada is a tension between the announcement of progressive climate policies and actual state interventions. At the federal level, the design and implementation of climate policy in reality shield the fossil fuel extractive sector from their effects (Carter, 2020) The field of tensions that has emerged around Québec's climate policies rather concerns its economic framing. Political elites have tended to frame climate policies as economic development opportunities in tandem with representatives and lobby groups from industry and business (a green growth bloc), whereas environmental groups have mobilized for climate policies centred and focused on the structural transformations needed to reduce GHG emissions. The labour movement is caught in the middle between these social forces (Viens et al., 2023).

This field of tensions has grown out of past socio-ecological struggles in Québec around fossil fuel infrastructure projects in the last decade (Sauvé et al., 2024). These struggles first against shale gas fracking, then against 2 major pipeline projects Energy East and GNLQ seeking to secure and eastward access to world markets for western Canadian hydrocarbons, led to the formation of wide coalitions which included the labour movement (these will be detailed further below). Though there were some wedges inside the labour movement

which will be examined below, the overall effect on the climate policy framework in Québec was the emergence of a broadly shared consensus on an energy transition taking the form of a deep and thorough decarbonization of the economy and society (Sauvé et al., 2024). It is this consensus that led to the 2021 “keep it in the ground” legislation by the governing centre right “Coalition Avenir Québec” party, which had a very weak environmental platform when compared to other parties.



The debate in Québec now concerns the trajectory of decarbonization. Apart from GHG reduction targets for 2030 and 2050, the main policy instruments that determine this trajectory are: Québec's "Plan for a green economy", its energy policy and finally its carbon pricing mechanism through the cap and trade carbon market it has with California. The "Plan for a green economy" (PEV) and GHG reduction targets are policy tools developed by the Environment ministry in Québec, implying parliamentary consultations with interested parties. The initial legislation establishing the PEV was passed in 2018, and it has been updated and refined since through an iterative process which includes extensive consultations. There is no formal independent entity which governs this process in Québec, parliamentary consultations are by invitation only. Trade unions, as well as business interests and environmental groups have participated in all of these consultations, spoken and presented written memoirs. A summary examination of these documents show the range of positions found by Viens et al. (2023) between a green growth business led bloc at one end to a more ecosocial perspective led by grass roots environmental groups at the other.

2.1.3 The environmental movement and the evolution of climate policy framework in Québec

Québec has been marked by an important series of environmental struggles concerning fossil fuels that have deeply marked today's climate policymaking. The labour movement has also been impacted by these struggles, which have shaped conceptions of just transition and engagements with climate politics. Since the early 2000s Québec has been the stage for three important victorious waves of fossil-linked environmental conflicts. A first wave was sparked by the discovery of shale oil in the Saint Lawrence Valley, a second was around major pipeline projects aiming to export to world markets tar sands-based oil by the east coast, and the third was provoked by a natural gas liquification and export terminal project planned at a deep-water port in the North-Eastern region of the Saguenay. This terminal was to be hooked up to the western Canadian gas fields through a

new pipeline. All three struggles were successful in terminating these projects, but most importantly all three involved the creation of wide citizen-led coalitions with significant union involvement. The legacy of these struggles is the existence of the Common Front for an Energy Transition, a wide coalition of organizations which includes all large labour federations and is currently presided by a labour federation representative. The Common Front and other coalition type organizations have created a bridge in Québec between environmental groups, more informal civic organizations and labour federations. They have also contributed to a change in perspective, as these movements recast struggles against fossil fuel projects as struggles for transition. Because of union involvement in shaping this change of perspective, this is also clearly framed as a "just transition", though there are important debates inside these coalitions on the definition of socio-ecological justice. Given the breadth of these coalitions, they have exerted considerable influence on the way climate policies have been framed in Québec, though coalition work is not without tensions and contradictions. A central wedge in the movement is between unions and more youth-based, radical elements of the environmentalist groups, and concerns growth and capitalism. For the former, transition is a green growth strategy that if carefully planned and controlled by the state can deliver well-paying union jobs, for the latter some form of degrowth and postcapitalist planning is considered the only trajectory compatible with the achievement of the province's climate goals. This rift also concerns legitimate political means: younger and more radical activists in these coalitions call for a general or social strike for the climate and other disruptive mobilizations, whereas others prefer more conventional forms of climate politics and the mobilization of existing structures of labour relations.

2.2 Organized labour in Québec

In this section, we present a brief overview of the Québec labour movement and summarize the main features of the industrial relations system. We also examine the role of unions in climate policy-making.

2.2.1 Unionisation in Québec: Stability and Uneven Distribution

In Québec, trade unions continue to exert a significant influence on working conditions: the union coverage rate has been just under 40% for the past fifteen years (39,5% in 2024), a higher

rate than in Canada (30.2% in 2024) and the United States (11.4% in 2024). Beyond this overall rate, it should be noted that this presence is much more marked in the public sector (84.7% in 2024) than in the private sector (22,9% in 2024). It also varies according to economic sector. As Table 1 shows, it will be more marked in the public administration, education and service sectors, and to a lesser extent in the construction, transport and warehousing and manufacturing sectors. Lastly, it will be much weaker in private service sectors such as professional, scientific and technical services and accommodation and food services.

Table 4: Data on employment and unionisation in Québec in 2024. Source: Statistique Canada, *Enquête sur la population active, 2024*. Adaptation by the Institut de la statistique du Québec.

Sectors	2023 (%)
Production of goods	39,9
Production of services	39,4
Industries	2023 (%)
Primary industries	19,9
Public services	73,9
Construction	59,0
Manufacturing	29,4
Trade	16,1
Transport and storage	43,4
Finance, insurance, real estate and leasing	15,9
Professional, scientific and technical services	7,4
Management and administrative services	29,3
Educational services	81,0
Health care and social assistance	65,0
Information, culture and leisure	30,3
Accommodation and food services	9,0
Other services	15,6
Public administration	81,6

While in Canada there is only one major labour organization, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), in Québec several central labour bodies coexist: union pluralism makes it possible to inject an interesting dynamic into public debates, particularly on the issue of the climate crisis. On this issue, nine union organizations are part of a broad inter-union coalition.

The major unions essentially fulfil two main roles: the defence of employees' economic and professional interests (collective bargaining, compliance with negotiated collective agreements and representation in workplaces) and the defence of their social and political interests (political action and representation in society). As we shall see, the hybrid nature of the industrial relations system enables Québec's union organizations to act as much at workplace level as at sectoral, regional or even within labour market institutions (see next section). The structure of Québec's trade unions allows them to act at multiple levels to deal with the climate crisis, notably through collective bargaining (negotiation of green clauses) or through social dialogue (retraining the workforce in the face of new green technologies).

2.3 Québec's industrial relations system

As mentioned, Québec's industrial relations system is a hybrid, adopting features of both the North American system and certain European systems (Laroche & Jalette, 2016). On the one hand, the Québec system is based on the main principles of the American system. It is a decentralised labour relations system, with collective bargaining taking place at the establishment level, or at the company level where there is only one establishment (Laroche & Jalette, 2016). The Québec system aims to recognize and protect employees' right of association and the right to collective bargaining. More specifically, the Labour Code, the cornerstone governing collective relations in Québec, grants the monopoly of representation of all employees in the certification unit to the majority union association. Once certified, the union thus becomes the employees' sole interlocutor for negotiating working conditions with the employer. This monopoly of

representation implies an obligation to represent fairly and equitably all employees covered by the accreditation unit, whether or not they are members of the union. Employees thus have the right to be fairly represented by their union or to submit a disciplinary sanction to arbitration if the union has not fulfilled its duty of representation (Labour Code, sections 47.1 to 47.6). It should also be noted that this obligation on the part of the union stems from the compulsory union dues checkoff provided for in the Labour Code, which entitles union dues to be collected at the source, i.e., from members' wages, or the equivalent of the amount of union dues for employees who choose not to be members of the union organization because they benefit from the results of union action (Coutu et al., 2010).

Certification also has a number of other effects, such as making it impossible for another union to file an application for certification for the same group of employees (Labour Code, section 25). Certification thus ensures the stability of the certified union: it can only be dislodged at certain specific times provided for in the Labour Code, and it continues to exist despite changes in the employer's legal structure. The filing of an application for certification also results in a freeze on working conditions (Labour Code, section 59) until certification is refused or granted, and thereafter for the duration of the negotiations, until the right to strike or lockout is exercised.

Québec's labour relations system is also based on the principle of free negotiation between the parties. The State interferes very little in negotiations or labour disputes, acting more as a referee than a player. The subject of negotiation or the scope of what can be negotiated is legally unlimited (Article 62, Labour Code), allowing the parties to address any provisions relating to working conditions that they deem relevant, provided that they are not contrary to public policy. The system also provides for an obligation to negotiate diligently and in good

faith (Article 53, Labour Code), thereby forcing the parties to seek to reach a genuine agreement. Various mechanisms are also provided to help the parties reach an agreement, including conciliation and arbitration. The parties may also resort to a strike or lockout during negotiations only, as an industrial peace obligation must be respected throughout the term of the collective agreement in force. It should therefore be understood that the parties, because of this principle of free negotiation, could introduce provisions into collective agreements that would make it possible to respond to the climate crisis.

On the other hand, this system remains an exception in North America regarding social dialogue practices, which are often tripartite (employers, unions and government representatives) or even multipartite. Indeed, it was in the wake of the 'quiet revolution' of the 1960s that a number of institutional innovations were put in place in Québec, enabling the social partners to discuss a range of issues that had traditionally escaped collective bargaining, including vocational training, work-family balance, employment insurance, etc. (Laroche, 2013). Laroche and Barré (2012), identify three modes



of social concertation in Québec: 1) permanent consultation institutions, which are essentially aimed, on the part of the Québec government, at consulting Québec's social partners and jointly defining new practices in the areas of vocational training, such as the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail (CPMT¹) or sectoral workforce councils (in 29 economic sectors); 2) participation on the boards of public bodies such as the Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CNESST²); 3) and the many informal concertation activities that have been organized over the years, particularly in the context of socio-economic summits (p. 69).

The hybrid nature of Québec's industrial relations system allows trade unions to act at different levels and to take a stand on a variety of issues affecting workers, including the climate crisis. In this sense, Québec trade unionism is rooted in neo-corporatism, which can be transformed into green corporatism (Dupuy & Pasquier, 2024). This means that unions participate in these institutions of social concertation with employers and the state by developing adequate internal structures and expertise. The existence of institutions for social concertation divided according to economic sectors is reproduced in the trade union bodies. The central labour bodies either directly represent a sector of the Québec economy, such as the FAE, FIQ, APTS, SPGQ, SFPQ and CSQ, which are confined to public services (health, education, civil service, municipal services and public enterprises), or dedicate the representation of specific sectors to federations, such as the CSN, or affiliated unions, such as the FTQ, which exclusively represents workers in an economic sector.

The following sections show the extent to which Québec trade unions can act on the climate crisis and the just transition.

2.4 The role of unions in climate policy making: Political pressure to influence Québec's transition trajectory

The previous section highlighted the ability of Québec unions to act at different levels of the industrial relations system to influence the trajectory of the climate transition. However, we must point out that their actions are limited in scope. Unions can act on a variety of issues, especially in relation to workforce training and skills, but to a lesser extent on economic planning and the development of industrial or climate policies. In fact, as mentioned, for Québec unions, there are no functional channels with the government that allow direct participation in the enactment of climate policies. On these points, the main route for unions to exert influence is by raising their voice in civil society through participation in coalitions and the challenges they raise to various projects introduced or permitted by the government. In this context, trade union coalitions and coalitions with other groups in society, particularly environmental groups, are essential to ensure that the voice of workers is heard in social demands. In some cases, they also invest in non-profit organizations (NPO) dedicated to environmental protection.

1 Labour market partners commission (our translation).

2 Standards, equity, health and safety at work commission (our translation).

2.4.1 Initiatives at municipal and regional levels

Some trade union demands are made because they combine the social interests of their members with the goal of fighting climate change, mainly at regional and municipal level. It is generally the unions' regional bodies that are at the heart of this type of demand. Communities are included insofar as this helps to advance the interests of workers represented by the unions. Coalitions with environmental groups or groups representing citizens make it possible to defend the interests of workers as citizens, i.e., in their realities outside the world of work.

This is why Québec has also set up Comité régionaux de l'environnement³ (CRE) at regional level. There are 17 CREs in Québec (all regions in Québec except Northern Québec), including 3 on which union representatives sit, in Montreal, Laval and Lanaudière. These NPOs receive support from the Québec government, notably through a recognition and financial support programme that has been in place since 1995. Their mission is to promote a socio-ecological transition and bring together local, municipal and regional players. Being involved at this level enables unions to position themselves in sustainable development, biodiversity protection and waste management projects.

For one trade union adviser, these issues can be a central factor in mobilizing workers around the climate crisis and the need for a just transition:

“

But it doesn't raise awareness just by talking about jobs. It's often the community too. And young people, you talk to them about health, then their family because the priorities of young people versus middle-aged or older people are really work-family, then their family first.

(HBS_QUE_TU_8)



³ Regional Environment Committees (our translation).

It is in this sense that the unions are taking part in discussions on urban development and land use legislation to protect workers' homes or personal activities in nature, by intervening at municipal level in waste management and other municipal services as well as by participating on the CREs.

As one regional representative put it:

“

There are threats to biodiversity, particularly in the Steinberg woodland in the east of Montreal. Here too, citizens' groups have come to us for support. And we also have members who live in that area, so we're committed to causes like that ourselves.

(HBS_QUE_TU_18)

Some ecological actions can be found at regional level. The regional division of trade union activities is encouraging trade union organizations to develop a regional approach to economic development and social solidarity through coalitions such as the Réseau Vigilance Lanaudière, which is committed to a just and inclusive transition that helps to combat poverty and promote access to public services for all. The regional councils of the CSQ, CSN, FTQ and SFPQ are at the heart of this coalition and, more generally, of initiatives that defend the social interests of workers in regional development.

In some cases, local trade unions can also participate in this political pressure, especially when their members' professional activities are directly affected by the rules formulated to respond to climate challenges.

This is the case for municipal employees' unions, but also in the construction and residential energy sectors. By working with municipalities, they are strategically positioned to represent the social interests of workers in public transport, water and waste management, biodiversity in natural areas and the transition to new energy sources.

This is also the case for public transport development projects, which guarantee direct jobs in the construction sector in the short and medium term, as well as various direct jobs in transport operations - in other words, in highly unionized sectors offering quality jobs. In this respect, the unions' participation in the CREs enables them to propose and demand this type of project, such as the construction of the Réseau express métropolitain (REM) in the east of Montreal, an electric public transport service using a light metro that will be able to serve areas of the Montreal suburbs whose residents are currently dependent on the car.

Another example of a political coalition involving unions took place in 2022, when municipalities asked the Québec government to ban the use of natural gas in new residential construction (Robichaud, 2022)⁴. These initiatives are supported by the Sortons le gaz coalition⁵, in which CUPE and the TJC participate, but they are also the source of tension with the unions representing workers at Énergir, the main natural gas supplier. Nonetheless, this coalition involving the unions has enabled the voice and interests of workers to be heard in this concerted effort to influence the government's choices regarding the trajectory of the transition

4 The municipalities of Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Otterburn Park, Petit-Saguenay, Prévost and Saint-Cuthbert called for a ban on natural gas in new buildings.

5 “Keep the gas out” (our translation) is a coalition that aims to inform the public about the impact of natural gas on health and the environment, to promote the advantages of replacing it as an energy source, and to propose possible solutions for doing so.



in Québec. It also highlights the internal tensions within the trade union movement that can be observed more generally between the trade union organisations involved in extractive industries and high GHG emitters and the others.

2.4.2 Initiatives at provincial and national levels

However, we have seen a shift in the trade union position on climate-related demands, particularly when they do not involve direct job losses. It is undoubtedly easier for trade unions to oppose projects that could generate future jobs, but which are harmful to the environment, than to put forward demands that could result in job losses for their members.

This trend is well illustrated by the unions' positions on various energy projects. The most notable of these projects was the Energy East pipeline. This fossil fuel investment project involved allowing the construction of pipelines across Québec to supply the seaport of Saint John in New Brunswick from the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan on the Canadian side and North Dakota on the US side. The unions initially chose not to take part in the discussions in the early stages of the project and the protests were led by the Front commun pour la transition énergétique (Common Front for the Energy Transition). The unions finally joined this coalition at the end of 2017, about a month after the

pipeline project was cancelled by Justin Trudeau's Liberal government.

Since then, Québec unions have taken part in public consultations on banning the extraction of hydrocarbons in Québec and have campaigned against initiatives to exploit and process liquefied natural gas. Although no jobs were lost, these projects could have created jobs for unionized workers and, in this sense, mark a change in the demands made by Québec unions.

However, we have observed tensions between national trade union organisations and local unions, which are often concerned with ensuring the economic vitality of their region. This is the case with a liquefaction plant and liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline project planned for the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region. Although the project was cancelled in 2021 and the company responsible is currently contesting its cancellation in arbitration, the unions only promoted the project at local level, where it would have created jobs. This example also illustrates the internal conflicts within the unions, as one union adviser points out: "at national level [the national representatives], they refused to support LNG. I know that at local level we had representatives who went to the BAPE [Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement⁶] to promote it" (HBS_QUE_TU_1).

6 Office for Public Hearings on the Environment (our translation).

Québec's trade unions are also making a number of demands to encourage public investment in certain industrial sectors, with the aim of maintaining or creating new jobs. For most workers, the central implications revolve around the issue of jobs. The fear of job losses linked to policies to combat climate change is particularly acute in industrial sectors, where trade unions play a role in guaranteeing workers' job security by seeking solutions to adapt company activities. These proactive approaches therefore aim to encourage investment in sectors that would be targeted by GHG reduction measures, or to propose alternative methods for better managing the natural resources needed for economic activity. The coalitions with civil society are also ways of defending the economic interests of workers at work. The collaboration between Unifor, FIM-CSN and Nature Québec on the protection of the woodland caribou in Québec, for example, hinges on its ability to ensure forest renewal in order to maintain the forestry industry and sawmills. Québec unions are making demands in the forestry sector specifically with regard to the management of endangered species such as woodland and mountain caribou. Unifor and FIM-CSN are active in proposing a transformation of land-use planning to protect these species, which ensure the wood production cycle. Poor forest management could make the future work of forestry workers more complex, and they have worked with environmental groups to identify possible solutions for the sustainability of the resource by protecting the caribou.

“There is a small coalition [...] asking for a roadmap of demands to improve the forestry regime”

(HBS_QUE_TU_13).

This is also the case with energy transition plans that propose the electrification of the car fleet. The unions are encouraging investment in Québec battery plants along the lines of what is being done in Ontario, despite a certain delay. As this prospect is also supported by the Québec government, the unions see opportunities for job creation. As well as creating jobs in the automotive sector, this will

increase demand for low-carbon electricity, for which Québec has the engineering capacity and construction workforce to build new hydroelectric dams.

Where it is not possible to adapt activities and therefore maintain jobs, trade unions propose retraining measures for workers. However, these demands for a just transition are mainly put to governments and companies. Trade unions have few means of forcing these actors to develop and adopt such measures, mainly through social concertation and collective bargaining, because of the decentralised nature of the industrial relations system.

The industrial unions also see the possibility of revising the carbon pricing system under which Québec offers free emission rights to companies. This system, which is unique in Canada, allows for flexibility in pricing, but could be tightened up to ensure greater reductions in greenhouse gases, especially in sectors where technologies exist and could be implemented by companies to reduce greenhouse gas production, such as the aluminium sector.

The reality of Québec's natural resources means that jobs in the petroleum sector are limited to a few refineries, mainly in the east of Montreal. Indeed, as announced by Québec Premier François Legault at COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, the Québec National Assembly has passed a law in 2022 aimed primarily at putting an end to hydrocarbon exploration and production and to public funding of these activities. The fact that the exploitation of hydrocarbons (i.e. oil and gas) is banned in Québec limits dependence on these polluting, highly unionized and highly paid jobs. Unlike other Canadian provinces, starting with Alberta, which is heavily dependent on oil from the tar sands, tackling the challenges of the green transition in Québec does not involve the prospect of massive job losses.

Depending on the sector, we find unions that are opposed to any form of union intervention in measures to combat climate change, even going so far as to oppose them, or even to adopt a certain climate scepticism.

“There are common issues for all, but there are people that are not ready to listen, that are not ready to understand”

(HBS_QUE_TU_7).

These unions are to be found to represent sectors that emit large quantities of greenhouse gases and whose activities are targeted by measures to combat climate change, particularly in oil refineries.

“Ask an employee if he wants to sacrifice his income for the planet or keep his income, well the answer is there”

(HBS_QUE_TU_7).

Due to this limited role of the fossil fuel industries, it is mostly the manufacturing and mining sectors that are targeted by environmentalist demands. For the unions representing workers in these industries, such as the FTQ and the CSN, the green transition manifests itself in the need to adapt industrial facilities and processes to reduce the climate impact of production and to protect the interests of the companies making the transition from their international competitors, essentially through a technological and economic paradigm. Trade unions in the metallurgy sector, represented mainly by the FTQ federations – the Métallos and Unifor – and the CSN federation – the Fédération de l’industrie manufacturière (FIM) – are exerting pressure on public decision-makers in favour of border taxes.

There are also challenges, particularly in the construction sector, in terms of adapting to climate change, which means reviewing procedures for outdoor work in hot weather, as one union adviser explained:

“ I had visited [a] building site and the roof was covered with aluminium ventilation hatches that reflected the sun and people were working on the tar where, I think it’s the 7th-8th floor, and trying to make the roof. It was about 45°C on the one floor, so it was hellish up there, and people were working 15-minute shifts.

(HBS_QUE_TU_1)

For unions representing construction workers, this means exerting pressure on employers and the government to review occupational health and safety standards in order to legitimize more frequent and longer breaks in extreme situations, since the standards did not previously take this reality into account.

Québec unions have also joined various coalitions aimed at putting forward a shared vision of the transition and influencing climate policies. **The Réseau action climat Canada (CAN-Rac; Climate Action Network Canada)** brings together 150 diverse organizations, including First Nations, environmental, social justice, development, health and youth organizations, as well as faith groups and local activist associations. The coalition includes a single trade union organisation, the FTQ, which frequently collaborates with the coalition in the run-up to the COPs, facilitated by its integration into the global Climate Action Network. The main mission of this coalition is to create ‘a broad social consensus for the implementation of comprehensive climate action plans involving all levels of government,

based on the best available scientific data, with policies, objectives, timetables and organisational charts, and to work with Canadian governments, First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, the private sector, trade unions and civil society for the effective implementation of these plans' (Website, *Réseau action climat Canada*).

To meet their objectives, CAN-RAC first lobbies to promote and strengthen Canadian climate policies, placing particular emphasis on the need to move away from fossil fuels and calling for measures to ensure a fairer transition. The coalition also includes international climate diplomacy in its repertoire of actions and is proposing to participate in various forums for dialogue (United Nations climate conferences and negotiations, G7 and G20 meetings, etc.). Its demands include increased climate funding, the elimination of fossil fuel subsidies, the protection of nature and biodiversity, the phasing out of oil, gas and coal, and the development of renewable energies.

The Front commun pour la transition énergétique (FCTÉ; Common Front for the Energy Transition) is also a civil society initiative involving trade unions. However, there are more unions involved, with the CSQ, the CSN, the FIQ, the FTQ, the SFPQ, the SPGQ, the UES-800 and the APTS, in addition to the CSN's Montreal regional committee, the CCMM. Created in 2015 without the presence of the unions, today they are active mainly in QuébecZÉN initiatives that seek to create carbon-neutral communities. To this end, they have produced a roadmap with the participation of 85 organizations and 12 universities in order to propose a coherent approach and empower stakeholders at the various levels of intervention.

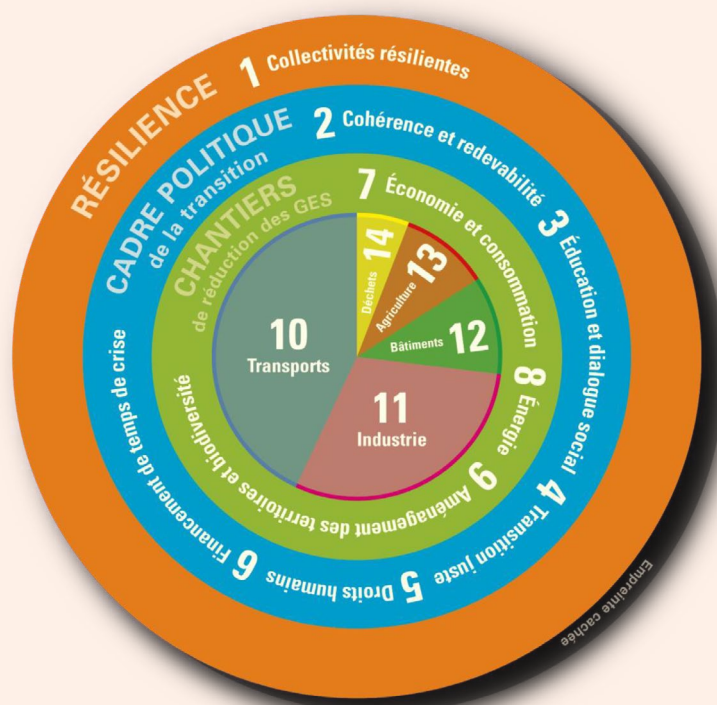
The "*Feuille de route pour la transition du Québec vers la carboneutralité*" (Roadmap for Québec's Transition to Carbon Neutrality) is phase 1 of the QuébecZen plan, which aims to 1) synthesize knowledge to reduce and avoid GHG emissions, 2) target the roots of the ecological and climate crisis, and 3) plan transformations (Dupuis, 2022).



The 14 chapters of the roadmap set out the different dimensions to be considered to ensure a just transition, which are also interdependent (see Figure 2). In phase 2 of the plan, collective action is at the heart of efforts to achieve carbon neutrality. The principle on which this second phase is based remains that for an area to become 'net zero emissions', not only must the community undertake a concerted and structured approach to the transition to carbon neutrality, but all the organizations (industries, businesses, institutions, etc.) and households in the area must do likewise (Dupuis, 2022, p. 6). Various initiatives have been launched to target these different levels of action in communities.

The unions also participate in a coalition including business representatives, the G15+. This group, whose main members are the president of the FTQ and a representative of the CSN's Fondation, also brings together the main employers' organisation, the Conseil du Patronat du Québec, and Écotech Québec, the clean technology cluster. It was set up during the pandemic to encourage the government to stimulate a solidarity-based, prosperous and green economic recovery, and is taking action through various levers, including the Québec Infrastructure Plan (PQI), impact investments, the introduction of ESG criteria and public eco-conditionality initiatives. The G15+ has also drawn up a roadmap setting out some fifteen principles for action that can be grouped under 3 headings: 1) a Québec that places the economy at the service of its population's quality of life, 2) a Québec that encourages sustainable consumption and production, and 3) a Québec that adapts to enable everyone to live in healthy, sustainable and affordable environments.

Figure 2: Roadmap for Québec's Transition to Carbon Neutrality



2.4.3 Initiatives at the international level

At the international level, interventions generally concern climate issues around GHG emissions. These interventions, led mainly by the FTQ and its affiliated unions, focus on workers' economic demands regarding the future of polluting industries and regulatory measures to enable a transition to low-carbon industries, accompanied by programmes for workers. Although trade union involvement in the international policy debates at the COPs has a planetary or transnational scope, this spatial scale is not overtly aimed at defining the practices or policies of other countries. It very succinctly aims at influencing the import practices of Québec and Canada, through the lens of international competition. These practices are in fact aimed at the economic protection of Québec workers and their industries. As such, union representatives mention that they are going to the COP "mainly to meet with leaders that don't want to meet us in Québec" (HBS_QUE_TU_1). By doing so, their aim is to convince political and economic actors in presence to invest in training and reforms of the public procurement system.

"We did the COP27, where we met all the provinces [of Canada] and lobbied to other provinces on matters of just transition, border taxation on carbon and clean sourcing"

(HBS_QUE_TU_8).

While there is indeed a conjunction with international unions and, by extension, a sharing of practices with unions in other countries, these rapprochements are often ad hoc or self-serving in order to highlight the interests of Québec union members.

In sectors such as metal and automotive, the transition is articulated on an international level, which generally corresponds to the North American free-trade economic area of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA). In practice, this corresponds to the pre-existing structures within the trade union organizations resulting from a shared history. This is the case, for example, in the automotive sector, which includes companies with operations in Québec, the rest of Canada (especially Ontario) and the United States, which used to be the American Rust Belt. This is also the case in the metallurgy sector, where the Steelworkers of Québec and Canada are frequently in contact with the American United Steelworkers to defend common policies of North American protectionism, or with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), who are in contact with the American United Food and Commercial Workers through their international bodies.

In this way, the international perspective merges with the national perspective in terms of the just transition approach. Trade unions defend economic and climate policies that give them leverage in representing their members. It is with this in mind that trade unions are taking part in social consultation bodies on the definition of green skills and the requirements for matching employment and training.



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

3.1 Trade union positions on the climate crisis and the just transition

Québec trade unions began to integrate the specific notion of just transition around COP21 in Paris in 2015. Before the concept was incorporated into the Paris Agreement, a more generic notion of “sustainable development” dominated the landscape, mainly through the CSN’s Fondation, a union fund investing in SMEs for a sustainable economy, and Bâtirente, a retirement fund focusing on ESG criteria. CSQ initiatives were also based on the economic, social and ecological triptych of sustainable development through the ACTES movement (Actions collectives en transition environnementale et sociale⁷, formerly Établissements verts Brundtland, EVB-CSQ) to promote environmental and citizenship education for young people in Québec schools and institutions. In health sector unions such as the APTS and the FIQ, sustainable development is still present in internal policies, calling for responsible management of resources in hospitals and consideration of air quality issues in establishments, for example. The FIQ adopted this policy on “sustainable development” for the first time in 2021. For a long time, the APTS integrated environmental issues with occupational health and safety before making them a subject around 2021, still under the heading of “sustainable development”.

Since 2015, the notion of Just Transition has caught on, and most trade union organizations have adopted policies or positions around it, taking up the foundations of the ILO’s “Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all”.

In practical terms, this means demanding a transition of the economy towards sustainability in a process that involves strong social dialogue mechanisms to represent and defend the interests of all workers. It is in this sense that trade unions are advocating that green jobs should be decent

jobs and that public policies should intervene to ensure the transition of jobs in polluting sectors. They are also campaigning for specific social consultation mechanisms on these issues and the opportunity to participate in them.

Thus, the main distinctions in the definition and actions of just transition in Québec are in fact based on a dual reality. On the one hand, the unions representing the public sector defend a sustainable development approach by arguing that they are defending workers who have the means to participate in adapting to and repairing climate change, whereas the private sector unions generally represent the biggest GHG emitters. Secondly, the carbon footprint of the establishments in which the workers are based varies. Thus, within the same union or federation, there may be both polluting and green activities.

The main challenges to these concepts of just transition come from unions with branches in the rest of Canada, particularly those that are part of union federations representing workers in the oil extraction industry in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

As one private sector union representative noted:

“It’s made toxic because, [...] especially in the west of the country [...], they’ve made the term as toxic as possible, they’ve associated it with the destruction of jobs and wealth in the west, with an east-west conflict.

(HBS_QUE_TU_3)

⁷ Collective actions in environmental and social transition (our translation).

These tensions underline the ambivalence in the traditional role of trade unions and their demands on climate change. On the one hand, environmental protection measures proposed by governments or civil society groups are likely to involve job losses. When this is the case, unions seek to protect the vested interests and acquired rights of their members, sometimes to the detriment of environmental protection (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2021). This is particularly the case in certain remote regions of Québec, where jobs are closely linked to the economic activity of exploiting natural resources or processing materials with high greenhouse gas emissions or other chemical pollution. In these regions, protecting jobs is becoming a major issue for trade unions because some cities, which were formerly company towns, depend almost exclusively on jobs with polluting employers. Such is the case of the Horne foundry in Rouyn-Noranda, which is exempt from emission standards for certain pollutants, most notably arsenic, and whose activities guarantee decent jobs for many of the city's families. The debate over these exemptions, which was taken to the public arena and eventually to Parliament, placed the union in a difficult position, as workers were called "baby killers" and basically held responsible for the health problems caused by the plant's polluting emissions by some citizens (La Presse Canadienne, 2022). Faced with the employer's threat to close the plant, the union walked a fine line: discuss with the employer possible options to reduce the production of pollutants to acceptable levels, but make sure to keep jobs in this remote region of Québec.

3.2. Multiple coalitions for a just transition

The Québec unions have decided to coalesce to establish common demands and share their practices on just transition.

The only initiative exclusive to the trade unions is the **Réseau intersyndical pour le climat (RIC; Inter-union Network on Climate)**. It was set up on Earth Day, 22 April 2021, to mobilize workers in the fight against climate change. It brings together the nine largest federations and central labour bodies, namely the CSD, CSN, CSQ, FTQ, APTS, FAE, FIQ, SFPQ and SPGQ, representing some 1,250,000 workers. This coalition is therefore an opportunity for Québec's trade union organisations to exchange information and resources, but above all to formulate demands with a common voice. The aim of this coalition is to wage a common struggle to demand meaningful action from governments in the face of the climate crisis, and to move beyond the logic of workplace adaptation to focus on measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and social protection.

The unions that make up this coalition are working together on the basis of the just transition concept developed by the ILO (2015) and are advocating measures to secure workers' quality of life during the transition to a low-carbon economy (Website, *Réseau intersyndical sur le climat*). Various demands have already been put forward by this trade union coalition to facilitate these industrial changes: major investment in low-pollution technologies and sectors that generate jobs, diversification of local economies, improved social protection measures and the development of vocational training to better equip workers.

There is also another trade union initiative, the **Travailleurs pour la justice climatique (WCJ; Workers for Climate Justice)**, which is an outflow of a broader civil society initiative, "the Planet Invites itself to Parliament". This coalition, supported by Québec trade union organizations, coordinated a demonstration and social strike on Friday 27 September 2019 that brought together half a million



people in Montreal and several thousands in other Québec cities. After this march, some unions wanted to integrate climate demands into workplaces with an equivalent idea that “the Planet invites itself to work”. The project, which aims to bring together workers wishing to campaign for climate justice, is being contested because of its central pressure tactic, which is to propose a climate strike. The first strike led by this coalition took place on 23 September 2022 with environmental justice student organizations and community groups. Under Québec’s industrial relations system, a climate strike would have consequences for workers, since strikes can only be called at specific times, usually over issues of working conditions. This is one of the reasons why Québec’s trade unions have opted for a coalition to take account of their roles and responsibilities as exclusive representatives of workers.

As we have seen, the trade unions have been able to incorporate into their repertoires of action a number of measures to address the problems inherent in the climate crisis and the solutions to be implemented

to promote a just transition. In a context of trade union pluralism, it is worth highlighting the concerted action taken by the various Québec union organizations to emphasize the need for measures to consider employees in both the public and private sectors, and even those working in high-emission industries. The various alliances with social groups and their presence in consultation bodies also enable them to multiply the opportunities to assert workers’ interests.

3.3 Social dialogue and the just transition

On the issue of the green transition - the term used in social concertation - various labour market institutions in Québec are also encouraging sustained dialogue between the social partners. It is important to consider that these institutions are playing a leading role in the green transition in Québec, particularly given the optimistic forecasts for the impact of this transition on the labour market. The CPMT, essentially a national forum for dialogue and collaboration between business representatives, the workforce, community

organisations active in the field of employability, the education community and economic and social ministries, which aims to ensure a match between the needs of the labour market and the skills of the workforce, as well as the training offered, has been given the mandate to develop a diagnosis to define the trades and skills required for the green transition (Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale, 2021). EnviroCompétences, the sectoral committee for the environment, in collaboration with a committee of experts from academia, trade unions, the economy, government and the environment and renewable energy sector, has drawn up this exploratory report on the effects of the green transition on the labour market. The report concludes that the green transition is not expected to result in major job losses in Québec, although there will be a need to upgrade and retrain the workforce (EnviroCompétences, 2021). This report also laid the foundations for a more in-depth approach to developing the skills of the workforce in the face of this transition.

National and sectoral social dialogue institutions are thus becoming important places for planning the matching and development of workforce skills, and enabling trade union organisations to play a leading role in this area. It is mainly in the sectoral workforce committees that this work takes place. In these consensual institutions, the social partners must work together to draw up action plans to adapt the key skills of the workforce to the changes needed in industrial processes to deal with the climate crisis or to guarantee a form of workplace safety.

In short, it is important to understand that the hybrid nature of Québec's system of labor relations allows for multi-level dialogue on the issue of the climate crisis. The social partners can in fact develop different solutions to better deal with the climate crisis and promote a just transition. In parallel with these concertation activities, Québec trade unions have also chosen to form or join coalitions to broaden the range of sites where they can share the interests of the workers they represent and increase the pressure on political decision-makers in the province or the country.

We clearly established in section 2 that the scope of union action through supra-company social dialogue was limited to the issue of workforce skills development (Laroche, 2013). In the Québec context, however, this institutional fabric makes it possible to position the trade union actor at the core of the debates on the green transition, considering its anticipated trajectory. Given that the Québec economy is not dependent on the fossil fuel industry, that massive job losses are not anticipated and that the main challenge facing the government in the context of the green transition remains adapting the skills of the workforce to the needs of businesses, the social partners, including the unions, can play a leading role in this area.

In practice, however, not all sectors have the same resources at their disposal, particularly those with labour shortages where the tendency is to reduce qualification requirements in order to recruit low-skilled labour more quickly. Through its Ambition-Compétences programme, the CPMT is also seeking to develop the skills of the employed workforce through various calls for projects related to specific jobs, sectors or business needs (CPMT, 2022b). One of the areas targeted by the programme is the green economy and digital transformation. A budget of 46 million dollars is available to support companies wishing to upgrade skills or retrain their workforce as part of their green and digital transitions. Another example of the work carried out by the CPMT is the report on *Les pistes d'action relatives aux impacts de l'électrification des transports sur la main-d'œuvre* (Courses of action

to address the impact of transport electrification on the workforce) (CPMT, 2022a) which was mandated to draw up a diagnosis to define the jobs and skills needed for the green transition..

Other sectoral workforce committees are also taking part in this major reflection aimed at upgrading the skills of the workforce. For example, the CSMO-Auto (committee in the automotive industry) has collaborated on the design of training for workers handling halocarbons, as well as short-term training in electric vehicle mechanics in the automotive industry (CSMO-Auto website). The CSMO-textile, for its part, has developed a green policy: reducing waste at source, reusing an object by giving it a new life, and recycling and recovery, which consists of using materials in ways other than reuse and recycling (for example, composting). Finally, the sectoral committee of the metallurgy industry has also organized a general meeting in 2022 to better identify the challenges facing the workforce in the face of climate change. Various avenues for action were identified by the players, including the usefulness of cross-sectoral monitoring to identify new technologies for reducing emissions in the metal industry and to share best practices. Workforce training was, of course, identified as necessary to deal with these new technologies. The CSMO is also considering the identification of new green skills that need to be developed by workers in this industry.

The existence of these institutions for social dialogue enables trade unions to participate in determining the guidelines for the resilience of the Québec economy to the climate crisis. However, the scope of these institutions is limited in that they have no regulatory power to force companies to implement training at local level, which is in line with the findings of Laroche and Barré (2012) regarding the gap observed between the sectoral and local levels of social dialogue in Québec. To date, collective bargaining at plant level has focused on aspects peripheral to work organisation, which the next section will address.

3.4 Collective bargaining on green clauses

A channel of influence used by trade unions takes place at plant level. At this level, it is traditionally through collective bargaining that unions exercise the voice of workers. However, negotiable subjects are established between the parties around working conditions, and climate issues do not always appear as working conditions issues for companies – and sometimes even for workers. As a result, they are often relegated to the background during collective bargaining, despite some attempts to link employment and environmental issues through collective agreements. Consequently, as one union adviser said of the green clauses in his federation, “we have them, but now whether they manage to get them into collective agreements is another matter, but they are still part of our draft agreement, which we use for all negotiations” (HBS_QUE_TU_4).

Clauses that can be described as ‘green clauses’ can be found in a relatively limited number of collective agreements in Québec (Michaud & Laroche, 2024). Above all, we can classify these clauses according to whether they concern the core activity of the company in terms of the organisation of production and work or peripheral activities. On the one hand, collective agreements could be used in adapting practices central to economic activity that consume raw materials or resources and emit chemical pollutants or greenhouse gases, in response to new standards or in anticipation of the ecological crisis. These dispositions are generally used to change the process of production and adapt the skills of the workforce. On the other hand, collective agreements can develop clauses on practices that can be implemented without directly affecting the production inputs or outputs essential to economic activity, but which could have an impact on the environmental or carbon footprint of the company as a whole. These dispositions may relate to mobility issues for the workers or to access to recycling and compost on the workplace. At the frontier of these poles, dispositions may relate to ongoing negotiations in committees. The classification of these dispositions will therefore depend on the mandate and the degree of consultation accessible to workers: some committees being limited to spring cleaning and sharing information on the emissions while others can extend to consultation or decision-making on technological change projects.

We can go into more details on the nature of the dispositions by looking at whether they involve introducing new clauses or adapting existing ones. There are indeed innovations in collective bargaining which did not have environmental committees labelled as such or specific dispositions explicating the needs for the organisation to reduce carbon emissions. Other dispositions are in fact already present in the collective bargaining and adaptable to the needs of the transition. For instance, many collective agreements have dispositions on workforce development and training to help foster ecological modernisation. Also, most Québec unions are forced by the labour laws to have health and

safety committees which have the power to decide on the personal protective equipment (PPE) which can then adapt the needs to climate change-related issues.

Our analysis of the collective agreements in a recent publication (Michaud and Laroche, 2024) shows that green clauses generally concern peripheral aspects of the company’s activity (see table 2), i.e. they do not commit employers to making substantial changes to the content of production, as in the case of clauses encouraging sustainable worker mobility. Instead, few economic practices are discussed in committees and most companies where the union is involved in the decarbonisation process or, conversely, do so outside the collective agreement through informal committees (Michaud and Laroche, 2024). Collective agreement clauses dealing with the organisation of production and work and having a protective effect for workers tend to be pre-existing clauses that can be mobilised to ensure job security or health and safety at work.

Table 5: Green clauses in Québec

Adapted by the authors from Michaud, J. and Laroche, M. 2024.

Provisions (n=74)		
Green clauses	Production and work organisation	Peripheral aspects of the company
	Environmental protection (n=13)	Sustainable mobility / collective transport / telework (n=32)
	Environmental committee/delegate (n=15)	
	Investments projects (n=1)	Responsible sourcing (n=3)
		Union funds for ecological projects (n=1)
Adaptable clauses	Technological change (n=2)	
	Employment protection: floor (4,03%) / guaranty (15,51%)	
	Training and workforce development: Human resources development committee (34,57%)	
	OHS et PPE (71,09%)	
	Access to information (n=0)	
	Right to refuse to work (n=4)	
	Whistleblowers (n=1)	
	Environmental training (n=2)	

We can thus conclude that collective bargaining at the plant level does not yet generate many clauses enabling unions to become actively involved in planning their company’s transition. While positions have been adopted in most Québec labour organizations to encourage local unions to take action in response to the climate crisis (Michaud and Laroche, 2024), it should be noted that few measures have been put in place to date to enable local unions to become real climate actors. In this respect, our interviews showed that local trade unions are still rather reactive; at best, they will be involved in implementing employers’ strategies.

There are also initiatives launched by the FTQ to create Just Transition laboratories in companies and organisations which consist of a roadmap on developing a joint committee with unions and managers to understand ways of reducing the carbon emissions and work together to implement

it. However, these voluntary practices are limited for unions where workers don’t have access to power of constraint, nor information on the production process. Indeed, as one union advisor puts it speaking about Just Transition laboratories: “well, no, it’s not easy, because in the end, you’re facing human resources people, and the president of the company which, himself, doesn’t understand that” (HBS_QUE_TU_4). By including green clauses in collective agreements, for example by setting up an environment committee within the company, the unions are seeking to implement changes in company practices. This is the case in some factories where the local union is able to work with the company to adapt technologies in order to restrict the consumption of materials or energy and encourage the recycling of materials in industrial processing or on construction sites.

4. Conclusion



Generally speaking, Québec's industrial relations context gives unions the **opportunity to intervene** on climate issues and, by controlling the narrative, unions can mobilise the embedded institutions of social dialogue to ensure that **workers' interests are represented and considered** in the transition.

As we have seen, Québec's industrial relations structure allows for coordination by the unions in collaboration with the other players in the world of work, business and government and, to a certain extent, civil society and environmental groups. Yet over the last decades the scope of social dialogue in the industrial relations system in Québec has narrowed, focusing today on professional training and skills development. Industrial policy lies largely outside of this scope, this is reinforced by the decentralized nature of the industrial relations system.

This neo-corporatist structure encourages the development of a professional industrial relations practice in which unions train specialist advisers and negotiators. We found that the main trade union organisations are active in the social dialogue bodies such as the CPMT and the CSMOs and can therefore influence the broad orientations regarding the development of the skills of the workforce within various sectors currently undergoing change. This implies specific training in understanding these social dialogue mechanisms, which can include a section on climate issues to facilitate the coordination of actions in cross-cutting bodies. In fact, officers specializing in the just transition are active in bodies dealing specifically with this issue, notably in trade union coalitions such as the RIC, but also in coalitions with civil society and environmental groups, as well as international bodies such as the COPs. Their training in climate issues enables them to act as specialists in the economic, social and political considerations of just transition for workers and, in so doing, to represent these interests on behalf of workers. These specialists do not work at local level, where collective agreements are negotiated.

The main role of trade unions in Québec remains, of course, the negotiation of collective agreements within accredited establishments. As Québec's labour relations system encourages free negotiation between the parties, this allows unions to negotiate clauses aimed at adapting to climate change, or even mitigating GHG emissions. While union negotiators are well trained in collective bargaining, both in terms of processes and various issues, they are not as familiar with issues related to the just transition. This is a major limitation that may explain the lower proportion of green clauses in Québec collective agreements.

In short, there is a problem arising from this specialisation within trade union organisations: specialists in climate issues do not participate in collective bargaining and negotiators do not integrate just transition issues into their bargaining agenda because they do not have the necessary knowledge to do so. A challenge in Québec is therefore the need to also train negotiators on climate related issues, this has not been a priority in the labour movement up until now. Developing a just transition approach in the workplace cannot therefore be achieved without matching climate issues with the initial and ongoing training of these negotiators.

This lack of knowledge about climate issues is also found among members of local union units, which no doubt partly explains why these issues do not become negotiating priorities. For trade unions to become real climate actors, there is a need to educate members to make them aware that the climate is an issue of real work and that action is possible and within their reach to promote a just transition. The major trade union organisations have begun the climate shift in the last decade, and conferences and congresses are now focusing on climate issues. These trade union bodies enable workers to participate, often as delegates from their local trade union organizations, and thus to advance their representations and interests within the trade union organisations. Training workers on climate issues can help to legitimize trade union action on the just transition.

Despite a strong coalition of Québec trade union organisations favouring a shared conception of the just transition, it is nevertheless noticeable that they favour differentiated strategies in the face of climate issues, which can be explained by their ideologies and the different sectors in which their main activities take place. Firstly, some Québec unions are not interested in political issues and focus their activities on workplaces. As a representative of one of these unions puts it:

“the majority of our energy is on servicing members and not on using our time to do research. [...] We’re really down to earth”

(HBS_QUE_TU_4).

Their conception of just transition, where it exists, focuses on protecting their members’ working conditions. Other unions pursue their demands through market mechanisms, i.e. investment in companies through their development capital networks - Fonds de solidarité FTQ and Fondation CSN - to create jobs and partnership with employers in the search for solutions. Finally, some unions are pushing for social strike action, which involves challenging the capitalist mode of production and arguing for greater worker participation in decisions on the organisation of work and production.

“You know, regarding the question of what is missing to make just transition happen, the main lever we have, the one that has the most bite, is the idea of a climate strike”

(HBS_QUE_TU_3).

We have also observed certain tensions within and between trade unions on climate issues, namely tensions between safeguarding jobs and the environment. In this respect, it appears that protecting jobs, especially in the absence of a negotiated transition plan that takes account of workers’ economic interests, takes precedence over protecting the environment. These tensions are shared by all the unions representing workers in polluting industries alongside workers in green jobs.

The articulation of these realities sometimes forces tense discussions in the organisations, but can also provide opportunities to reconcile these sometimes distant realities and the emergence of new solidarities.

To sum up, this report outlined the effective role of trade unions in Québec on climate change and illustrated policy considerations for trade unions. Despite the challenges and tensions observed within the Québec trade union movement, we were able to identify a repertoire of action that is still developing, but which already enables union actors to take part in the debates on climate change. More specifically, we were able to identify six main types of action available to Québec unions in the current context of the ecological crisis, which are deployed at different levels and require a strong capacity for articulation and intermediation.

1. Lobbying, mobilisation campaigns and social movements

Our review of trade union action on climate shows that they are heavily involved in the political arena to influence decision-makers at various levels of government. Some unions have intervened within NGOs to influence urban development policies, such as in regional environment councils (CREs), but also at provincial level to influence government investment in the green transition by demanding, for example, the inclusion of eco-conditionality criteria in calls for public tenders. Unions have also been active in lobbying the Canadian government to improve funding for retraining of workers under the Sustainable Jobs Act. Some of them are also concerned by the taxation of industrial and climate policies, as well as by the carbon market and precautionary financial policies. This has led them to call, for example, for border taxes to prevent social and environmental dumping, as in the case of the Steelworkers’ campaign to defend steel. By introducing a surtax on steel from China, Canada is denouncing unfair trade practices, but for the unions it is also helping to ensure a market for Canadian steel and aluminium with a smaller environmental footprint.



2. Alliances and coalitions

Through these actions, trade unions are also led to collaborate with civil society groups or to others unions, whose operations involve bringing together the interests of workers and ecology. These alliances help to legitimise the voice of workers in environmental issues, since their allies have complementary knowledge, but they also enable unions to gain a better understanding of the nature of these issues. In addition to these alliances with civil society groups, Québec unions use inter-union alliances to carry out joint projects such as the Réseau intersyndical sur le climat (RIC). This co-ordination of trade union actions makes it possible to develop a common, national approach to the ecological crisis in order to extract levers for action from workplaces and turn it into a social and political issue.

3. Social dialogue

Québec also has institutions of social dialogue whose tripartism is put at the service of just transition (Michaud and Laroche, 2024). In short, it is a question of considering the possibility of transforming pre-existing institutions in order to implement the transition. Some trade union actions

are in fact aimed at creating institutions with the actors concerned in order to perpetuate projects or anticipate long-term changes (trade unions, employers, the State, communities, ecologists, etc.), as in the context of the Sustainable Jobs Act, where the partners created the Sustainable Jobs Partnership Council to support workforce retraining programmes. Trade unions are also taking action in international negotiations to steer the ecological transition (Thomas, 2021). To this end, the FTQ is responsible for the Just Transition Work Programme of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which aims to implement the guiding principles on just transition negotiated in the Paris Agreement. By participating in the COPs, trade unions are able to develop international standards that can be used in Québec.

4. Collective bargaining and action at company level

Essentially for local unions, it is through collective bargaining that it is possible to institutionalise green clauses in collective agreements and put pressure on employers to develop green modernisation projects (Markey and McIvor, 2019). Our analysis has shown that there are still few such clauses in Québec collective agreements, and they often deal with peripheral aspects of firms' activities, such

as waste management, recycling and composting, as well as responsible procurement in cafeterias and incentives for workers' sustainable mobility (Michaud and Laroche, 2024). Our interviews in the field, however, revealed that unions do use various pre-existing clauses on occupational health and safety, technological change or cooperation committees that can enable them to take action on climate issues (Michaud and Laroche, 2024).

5. Financial player via pension plans

Trade unions have ways of participating directly in just transition investment through pension plans. Depending on the conditions in which unions and workers find themselves in relation to their pension plans, they can highlight forms of shareholder activism at company shareholder meetings or with savings banks in pension plan investment policies. These actions are little used directly by Québec unions, which instead sporadically support coalitions close to fossil fuel divestment campaigns aimed at encouraging pension plans and savings funds, such as the Caisse de dépôt et de placement du Québec (CDPQ), to withdraw specifically from fossil fuels. Unions in Québec are participating in the Sortons le gaz coalition, of which the Coalition Sortons la Caisse du carbone is a member.

6. Acting in economic development through labour funds

For unions, direct intervention in the economic structure to guide the just transition is carried out through workers' funds, namely the Fonds de solidarité FTQ and the CSN's Fondation. These individualised Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs) enable unions to invest in Québec companies. Among other means of action, these plans use impact investing and environmental, social and governance (ESG) eco-eligibility criteria for participating companies. In other words, they operate to meet economic growth objectives while seeking to combine this with sustainability objectives. While these two funds have distinctive internal features, they represent a form of ecological trade union action that enables workers to contribute to the ecological transition by aiming for job growth.

The strategies adopted by Québec unions in response to the climate crisis require them to take action at different levels of the industrial relations system and to invest significant organisational resources. According to Laroche and Murray (2024), for a union experimentation to achieve the desired results, it is necessary to align practices and actions at different levels of the union structure, but above all to ensure coherence between these actions, to encourage creativity at different levels and to encourage mobilisation around a common mission. When it comes to trade union action on the climate crisis, we have to admit that there is still a long way to go before the entire trade union structure is mobilised around these issues, but we can nonetheless highlight the efforts that have already been made.

In Québec, the main trade union organisations have positions on just transition and sustainable development. In some cases, these positions have led to the creation of specific jobs for which union employees are working to develop the necessary tools and means of action, in particular by taking part in meetings of the RIC's union alliances. Internal committees have also been set up to create forums for exchange and discussion with elected union representatives, as is the case with the FTQ's environment and sustainable development committee and the CSN's confederal environment and sustainable development committee. The unions are also developing a range of training courses for elected representatives and employees, and specific activities on the ecological crisis and the just transition are being developed in the main unions to raise awareness among workers. The challenge now is to build on these resources and actions to ensure that climate issues are genuinely taken on board at all levels of the union structure.

As for recommendations for governments, our study of trade unions in the context of policymaking puts forward the need to enlarge social dialogue to include negotiated definitions of trajectories and industrial green policies as well as just transition. Green social dialogue as defined in Québec offers space for discussion between actors but the range being limited to training and competencies, unions lack the necessary power resources to assure that workers are protected during the transition and that their voice be heard in decision related to the future of the economy. These policies could therefore be completed by a national training program around the needs of employers and the skills of the workforce.

Moreover, local social dialogue needs to be reinforced around issues related to the consequences and impacts of the climate crisis in workplaces. Discussions around solutions to ensure the physical and psychological protection of workers in the workplace happen at the sectoral and national levels of social dialogue and the links between these higher levels and the workplace needs to be strengthened to enforce policies and practices at the local level.

Sectoral impact assessment studies prior to the transition thus appear as necessary to identify the priorities of actors at multiples levels as well as the consequences of climate change on different workplaces and regions. These technical studies would ensure that employers and unions, even in small and medium enterprises, have access to scientifically grounded knowledge of the industrial processes, the means of reducing GHG emissions and the risks for markets, workers and citizens in local communities.

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List of mentioned Québec unions

Unions	Number of members	Main sector	Type of union
Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)	330 000	All sectors	Centre
Fédération de l'industrie manufacturière (FIM-CSN)	25 000	Industries	Sectoral, affiliated to CSN
Comité régional du Montréal métropolitain (CCMM-CSN)	100 000	All sectors	Regional, affiliated to CSN
Fédération des travailleuses et travailleurs du Québec (FTQ)	600 000	Private sector	Centre
Syndicat des Métallos [United Steelworkers]	60 000	Industrial private sector	Sectoral, affiliated to FTQ
Unifor	55 000	Industries, automotive and telecommunication	Sectoral, affiliated to FTQ
Union des employés et employés de service – section locale 800 (UES-800) [Service Employees Union]	20 000	Private sector	Sectoral, affiliated to FTQ
Travailleurs unis de l'alimentation et du commerce (TUAC) [United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)]	55 000	Food industry	Sectoral, affiliated to FTQ
Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ)	225 000	Education (public and private)	Centre
Centrale des syndicats démocratiques (CSD)	75 250	Private sector	Centre
Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE)	60 000	Education	Independant
Alliance du personnel professionnel et technique de la santé et des services sociaux (APTS)	65 000	Health professionals and technicians	Independant
Syndicat de la fonction publique du Québec (SFPQ)	40 000	Public employees	Independant
Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec (FIQ)	80 000	Health	Independant
Syndicat de professionnelles et professionnels du gouvernement du Québec (SPGQ)	30 000	Public professionals	Independant

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Contact details

Professor Mélanie Laroche

(Author)

Université de Montréal

✉ Melanie.Laroche.2@umontreal.ca

Dr Jonathan Michaud

(Author)

Université de Montréal

✉ Jonathan.Michaud@umontreal.ca

Professor Éric Pineault

(Author)

Université du Québec à Montréal

✉ Pineault.Eric@uqam.ca

Professor Vera Trappmann

(Principal investigator and project lead)

University of Leeds

✉ V.Trappmann@leeds.ac.uk

Professor Dennis Eversberg

(Project lead)

Goethe University Frankfurt

✉ Eversberg@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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