



Unions and Energy Transition: What has been Done and what is still Missing

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Tag: #greentransition #justtransition

As part of the work of the ADAPT Observatory on the ecological transition, we have already dealt with the concept of "just transition" and public policies (national and European) aimed at governing the effects of the energy transition.

We will now focus on unions and the practices they have put in place to deal with ecological transition. We will draw on the outcomes of research and interviews with 11 experts and 14 trade unionists¹ conducted by ADAPT researchers as part of the European project "Next Step: Transition."

Despite an increased awareness of the road to a green transition in the energy sector that has been taken at the EU and national levels, trade unions in the five countries examined in the research project (Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Spain) do not always share the same approaches with respect to the issue. On the one hand, in countries such as Italy, Germany, Belgium and Spain, trade unions in the energy sector consider the green transition to be a central issue on their agendas. Although some economies are more dependent on coal than others (all of which are still overwhelmingly supported by fossil fuels), there is a common willingness to support a conversion process that is now deemed inevitable, taking care of the implications on workers especially in terms of employment, training and health and safety. In all these cases, some unions are concerned about the real prospects for competitiveness and growth offered by the energy transition, without which our entire economic model would be compromised. On the other hand, in Bulgaria, where dependence on coal is still strong and public policies for a just transition are uncertain, the union representatives interviewed express even greater fears about the economic and social effects of ecological conversion, struggle to identify sustainable alternatives that meet energy needs, and state that they do not support the transition as a harbinger of significant job losses. This view is reflected in the Bulgarian trade union's abstention from putting in place awareness-raising and training actions on the issue for its representatives, as well as, abetted by a lack of constancy

¹ The following experts were interviewed: Valeri Apostolov (University of National and World Economy, Bulgaria), Kris Bachus (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium), Alexander Bendel (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany), Simone Claar (University of Kassel, Germany), Nadja Dörflinger (Federal Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, Germany), Béla Galgóczi (ETUI, Belgium), Anne Guisset (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium), Vassil Kirov (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), Oscar Molina (Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain), Serena Rugiero (Di Vittorio Foundation, Italy) and Paolo Tomassetti (University "La Statale" of Milan, Italy). With reference to trade union representatives, interviews were made at Jakob Embacher (EPSU), Vanya Grigorova (CL Podkrepa, Bulgaria), Franz-Gerd Hörnschemeye (IG BCE, Germany), Antonio Ingallinesi (FEMCA-CISL, Italy), Manuel Jaramillo Sánchez (UGT-FICA, Spain), Geeroms Jurgén (ACV-CSC BIE, Belgium), Michael Kunter (IG BCE, Germany), Gabriella Lanni (FLAEL-CISL, Italy), José Mesa Ortega (UGT-FICA, Spain), Nikolai Popnikolov (SMF Podkrepa, Bulgaria), Etienne Schelstraete (ACV-CSC BIE, Belgium), Inias Smit (ACV-CSC BIE, Belgium), Vladimir Topalov (SMF Podkrepa, Bulgaria), and Corinna Zierold (IndustriAll Europe).

and transparency on the part of the public actor, in sporadic or ineffective participation in tripartite procedures and bodies for consultation and joint construction of national and local initiatives for the just transition.

In contrast, elsewhere, initiatives have been carried out by the union, particularly at the confederal level, resulting in: studies on the impact of climate change in certain sectors and territories, such as those of the MAVETJ project (*Mapa de vulnerabilidad del empleo para una Transición Justa: análisis de sectores productivos y desarrollo de capacidades y oportunidades en adaptación al cambio climático*) by the Spanish confederation UGT; training courses and guidelines for managing the green transition in companies and sectors, such as those entitled *Taking steps towards a just transition at company/sectoral level through social dialogue* promoted by the Belgian confederation ACV-CSC in partnership with other unions in Europe; and departments within trade unions and specialized in environmental sustainability issues, such as the UGT *en Verde* action and research area created by the Spanish union. There have also been initiatives and policy documents jointly produced by trade unions and employers' associations in the energy sectors, such as the manifesto "*Employment and Energy for a Sustainable Transition*," promoted in 2021 by Confindustria Energia together with the trade unions FILCTEM-CGIL, FEMCA-CISL, and UILTEC-UIL, which outlines some guidelines for a just energy transition in Italy.

Similar actions have also been pursued by European trade union federations. From 2018 is the Skill2Power project conducted by the European social partners of the electricity sector to shed light on the retraining of workers impacted by the ecological transition and digitalization; while from 2021 is IndustriAll Europe's manifesto entitled *Nothing About Us Without Us*, which advocates the indispensable involvement of workers in the definition, regulation and implementation of policies for environmental sustainability. In this respect, however, it seems there is still a long way to go at both the EU and national levels, and not only with reference to Bulgaria. Rarely, in all the countries considered, are trade unions involved upstream in decision-making processes, right from the definition of the goals to be achieved. More often, they can be integrated into the management of the economic and social implications of paths and objectives already mapped out.

Positive examples of collective governance of the transition (at least with reference to its effects on the economy and the labor market) include the case of Spain, whose National Strategy launched in 2019 involved the conclusion of two national sector framework agreements (the first referring to coal mines and the second relating to coal plants), as well as the conclusion of the "Agreements for a Just Transition" (13 signed to date). Conceived as a tripartite transition management tool at the local level, these pacts set out a list of measures (new investments, training and employment guidance and reintegration actions, etc.) to support economic reconversion, employment and the population of the affected area. In Germany and Belgium, on the other hand, the union is involved in various advisory bodies at the federal and regional levels. Exemplary in this regard are the so-called "Coal Commission," established in 2018 by the German government, which led to the establishment of a plan to end coal-fired power generation and a series of recommendations, and the Flanders Environment and Nature Council in Belgium, established in 1995 with powers to analyze and make proposals and suggestions on issues of sustainable development, energy and natural resources.

In Italy, an interesting case of shared development planning, fostered by the specificities of the political and social fabric of the territory, is the "Pact for Work and Climate" of the Emilia-Romagna region, signed in December 2020 by more than 50 actors (including trade union representatives), who have committed themselves to several objectives, including that of ecological transition, implementing ad hoc measures in the field of, for example, investment in

research and development, including on sustainable mobility and renewable energy, prevention of hydrogeological instability, support for the circular economy and improvement in waste management and recycling.

Moving down to the company level, good practices of joint transition management have been noted especially in Germany, thanks in part to the safeguards offered by bargaining and co-determination that are still strong in the energy sector. Illustrative in this regard are the plans for early retirement and retraining of workers initiated by Currenta, an energy supplier at the Chempark sites (among the largest chemical parks in Europe), together with its workers' representatives. The company is in the process of moving away from coal-fired power generation to gas and possibly hydrogen, and major employment repercussions are expected. Training for more than 26,000 workers as well as financial support and relocation to other companies in the area have been facilitated since 2007 with the phasing out of coal mines by the cooperation between the German company RAG, worker representation and the Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the affected areas.


A few positive experiences of union involvement, unrelated, however, to specific green upgrading projects, can also be found in Spain, where corporate collective bargaining has sometimes succeeded, as in the case of the Repsol group, in enhancing the information and consultation rights of workers' representatives on environmental issues as well, and in introducing the figure of the environmental delegate, who is charged with collaborating with company management on the promotion of eco-sustainable initiatives, monitoring compliance with regulations on the subject and helping to organize training courses for workers. Also in Italy, collective bargaining that has addressed the issue of sustainability has often focused, as in Eni, on information and consultation procedures and the rights and prerogatives of workers' representatives for health, safety and the environment. In addition, performance bonuses linked to environmental sustainability indicators have been negotiated, such as the reduction of climate-changing emissions at Saipem. A real reconversion project, jointly managed by company management and union representation in Italy, was, starting in 2015, Enel's "Futur-e" program, aimed at redeveloping 23 thermoelectric power plants and a former mining area toward new opportunities for sustainable development. The project was a test case of the participatory model built in Enel and in particular, of the agreements on industrial relations, generational turnover and functional and geographic mobility signed between 2012 and 2013. Thanks to these understandings, it was possible to manage the reconversion of the affected sites through the early retirement of older staff, retraining and internal relocation of more than 900 employees. On the other hand, the involvement of stakeholders in the affected areas was functional in the search for new ideas for the economic and social enhancement of the industrial sites. Despite some information gaps however highlighted by the union, the "Futur-e" program is now internationally recognized as an inclusive model of circular economy.

Overall, the increased awareness of labor organizations, especially in Western Europe, about the impacts that the energy transition may have on working conditions, particularly from the point of view of employment, health and safety, and training, is indisputable. Likewise, experiences of shared and joint management of reconversion of some sites and industrial areas in several European countries are beginning to increase, also thanks to the support possibly offered by the institutional framework. However, even in these cases, the union seems to maintain a position of reaction, however constructive with reference to the management of social and labor implications, with respect to guidelines and development directions established by companies or the public actor. This subordinate approach, according to some experts interviewed, would be attributable to the persistence of a dilemma plaguing most workers' associations, which are divided between the recognition of the urgency of the green transition (which is strong especially at the top levels of

organizational structures) and the need to address the concerns of the represented about job losses and radical changes in activities and working conditions (which is felt especially in the corporate and territorial branches of representative structures); a dilemma that is even more concrete for organizations that operate as much in the fuel and the services sector.

This is a conceptualization of people's health and well-being that has traditionally separated, even in national legal systems, the sphere of occupational security from that of human health, and which now positively interacts with the one-sided approach of many governments and corporations in Europe, preventing trade unions from embracing a full idea of "just transition" and playing a frontline role in rethinking our development model. Thus, for example, by worrying about defending, in the North of our planet, jobs and productivity gains, European trade unions can momentarily overlook the risk that the supply dynamics of renewables will perpetuate the same power imbalances as the supply of fossil fuels, moving us away from the development of truly inclusive and democratic production processes.

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