



opinion

Text: **Brian Kohler**

What is beyond COP21?

Policy documents, resolutions taken at congresses, and dozens of sectoral conferences and regional meetings dating from the 1980s to the present, have debated and refined union positions on sustainability and climate change. There are no jobs on a dead planet, and sustainability is no longer a preference but a matter of survival, says IndustriALL's sustainability director Brian Kohler.

Why is climate change a union issue? A transformation is coming, whether the world takes action on climate change or takes no action and awaits the consequences. We must not allow it to become a violent scramble for resources such as water, energy, and fertile land that completely dismisses workers' rights and social protection.



COP21 • CMP11
PARIS 2015
 UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE

In Paris, on 12 December 2015 at the climate summit called COP21, a historic agreement to control greenhouse gases and limit climate change was reached. The agreement will have significant effects on most of IndustriALL’s sectors.

Labour’s three top demands for the climate talks in Paris were:

- To raise ambition and realize the job-creation potential of climate action
- To deliver on climate finance and support the most vulnerable
- Commit to securing a Just Transition for workers and their communities

The necessary ingredients for a successful climate accord are found in the Paris text. There is an ambition to hold “global average temperature to well below 2C° above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5C° above pre-industrial levels”. There is provision for periodic review. There is acknowledgement that a transformation of the economy is implied. There are references, although weak, to needed finance.

Just Transition is incorporated in the preamble with clear language:

“Taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities.”

Signatory parties must now accept that they have made a political commitment to Just Transition, strengthened by the ILO’s recent Guidance document on Just Transition.

Perhaps more important than government commitments will be the signals it sends to the global economy. It will become increasingly difficult for investors or insurers to justify the risks of putting their money into fossil fuels. This will not change the financial world overnight, but it will change it.

The Paris Agreement must be seen as a starting point, not a finish line, creating an institutional framework that has all the necessary ingredients to succeed.

A Just Transition for workers and the environment

The concept of a Just Transition is that workers, their families, their communities and their unions are respected and protected, while creating new decent work in sustainable industries. Workers did not choose jobs that damaged the environment; they needed work to support themselves and their families.

It is profoundly unfair that the entire cost of changes towards sustainability should be borne by working people.

Strong social safety nets are a prerequisite for a Just Transition programme, but resorting to such safety nets will never be labour’s first choice. The first choice, and the most Just Transition possible, will always be to create, evolve, or maintain sustainable jobs. A sustainable, or greener, job is not always what comes to an environmentalist’s mind. Even manufacturing solar panels and windmills requires fuel, energy, steel and plastics that must come from somewhere, and these must be considered sustainable jobs.

JUST TRANSITION IN REALITY

Just Transition was inspired by the policies that many governments, notably in the USA, put in place to reintegrate thousands of demobilized military into the civilian work force following World War II. A more recent and relevant example is how Germany handled the winding down of most of their coal mining industry in the last few decades. Thanks to good social protection programmes, creative labour adjustment policies, collaboration with trade unions - and adequate funding - workers and communities were kept whole, showing that the social outcomes of economic transitions depend on the public policies adopted, and that this can be done.

The only way to ensure a Just Transition is to create structured programmes to facilitate it and to deal with its consequences. If workers are blackmailed with their jobs, the environment will lose. Therefore workers must not be asked to make this choice. Trade unions must avoid becoming the “last defender of the indefensible”.

A Just Transition programme has to be all encompassing; a flexible approach to helping workers, their families, and their communities. It must involve workers in its design, and it must be customized to each situation. A Just Transition programme might even assist in the creative restructuring of obsolete industrial sites. And it must keep workers and their unions whole.



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Winning a just transition to a sustainable economy

Renewable energies will grow rapidly in the future to make up a greater proportion of the overall energy mix, and greener, more sustainable industrial processes and products will make up a greater proportion of overall industrial production. In the meantime the labour movement needs to make sure that workers do not pay the price for the environmental footprint of their industries.

Global greenhouse emissions need to peak now – February 2016 was already the warmest ever recorded – otherwise the Paris Agreement to keep global warming below 2C° will not be met and the social, economic and environmental consequences experienced by everyone, globally, will be catastrophic.

IndustriALL Global Union, the ITUC and the US trade union congress, AFL-CIO, met in Washington DC, USA, in March to discuss how the global labour movement will tackle policy pressures resulting from the Paris Agreement reached at the COP21 climate summit last December.

The particular focus of the meeting was how a Just Transition for affected workers can be achieved. Workers in the energy sector, particularly in coal, but also in heavily energy-dependent industries, will be strongly affected by efforts to control greenhouse gases and limit climate change in accordance with the Paris Agreement.

In some aspects, the trade union movement has overlapping interests with environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs); whereas in other aspects we share some concerns with our employers. **However, the expertise for industrial transformation and how to make this change socially fair and just, lies within the labour movement.**

The importance of environmental justice in this context is clear: especially in the developing world, many communities largely depend on single industries such as mining, but these plants are often also the largest environmental delinquents due to weak or lacking national environmental regulations and older technologies.

A Just Transition is not something that can be won at the bargaining table. It requires deliberate public policy choices, building on a foundation of strong social protection programmes and sustainable industrial policies that will transform existing jobs to be more sustainable as well as create plenty of new greener jobs.

A Just Transition will not happen by itself and the so-called free market will not deliver it. It requires intense lobbying and discourse with both companies and governments – otherwise workers will fall victim to a last-minute scramble for solutions to meet the Paris Agreement without the necessary socio-economic considerations.

It is our responsibility to show leadership at this crucial moment in history. **We cannot negotiate with the laws of physics; but we can – and will – advocate sustainable industrial policies and demand justice and decent work for all of today's and tomorrow's workers.**

THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION AND JUST TRANSITION

In 2015, the ILO convened a Tripartite Meeting of Experts to review, amend and adopt draft guidelines based on a compilation and thorough review of experiences from country policies and sectoral strategies towards environmental sustainability, the greening of enterprises, social inclusion and the promotion of green jobs.

The resulting ILO Guidance on Just Transition identifies nine key points to manage the impacts of potential environmental regulations and promote the evolution of sustainable and greener enterprises, within the framework of a Just Transition:

- Policy coherence and institutions (country specific)
- Social dialogue (multistakeholder)
- Macroeconomic and growth policies
- Industrial and sectoral policies (greener jobs; decent work)
- Enterprise policies
- Skills policies (also education)
- Occupational safety and health
- Social protection policies (health care, income security, social services)
- Labour market policies

The ILO's entry into the Just Transition debate is of great significance. It gives the concept an internationally accepted definition for the first time, as well as an institutional life within a specialized agency of the United Nations.

- 1 Brian Kohler at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *IndustriALL*
- 2 Paris 2015 UN Climate Change Conference. *COP 21*
- 3 Just Transition to a sustainable economy. *IndustriALL*