

Achieving a just transition

Only a people-first approach will succeed, writes Nick Robins

“What do we want?” a woman shouted into a megaphone as the London rain poured down upon Extinction Rebellion last October. The crowd responded in unison: “Climate justice!”

One of the many striking shifts that have taken place in the climate agenda over the past year is how the social dimension and the centrality of justice have come to the fore. No longer is climate action only about cutting carbon emissions to zero and building up defences to inevitable physical shocks. From the start, Greta Thunberg and the School Strike movement, along with Extinction Rebellion, have made the issue deeply personal, highlighting in particular how the prospects for today’s children are being stolen by continued emissions of greenhouse gases.

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we care about the end of the month”

In fact, if left unchecked, climate breakdown will become one of the world’s worst injustices in terms of the depth and duration of the damage it will cause for centuries to come, hitting those hardest who contributed least to the problem. As Pope Francis has made clear, we need to take action “to avoid perpetrating a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and future generations”.

The climate justice agenda goes further still, looking at how the causes and consequences of global heating are often refracted through the lenses of gender, race, colonisation and class. For Mary Robinson, in many ways of the godmother of climate justice – see *The Climate Justice Now Generation*, Issue 315 – it means “we need to create a ‘people first’ platform for those on the margins suffering the worst effects of climate change.” Added to this is the human and political imperative to make sure that the road to a clean, green economy not only delivers positive social progress, but

also does not marginalise people. In other words, we need a just transition too.

For too long, the climate agenda has been socially blind. In the US, President Trump was able to enlist the support of coalworkers in the USA fearful for their jobs. In France, President Macron’s plan to introduce a carbon tax on vehicles prompted the *gilets jaunes* ‘yellow vests’ backlash, with one protester memorably saying: “You care about the end of the world; we care about the end of the month.” As the UK’s Committee on Climate Change puts it, “if the impact of the move to net-zero on employment and the cost of living is not addressed and managed, and if those most affected are not engaged in the debate, there is a significant risk that there will be resistance to change, which could lead the transition to stall.”

Over the past two years I’ve been working intensively on the just transition both in the UK and at an international level. It’s clear that the transition is a good news story, one that could well lead to many more jobs, and vastly improved health and remove a large source of corruption and conflict in the world by phasing out fossil fuels – as well as avoiding climate catastrophe. But I’ve also learnt that these benefits are not automatic and new approaches are needed to consciously steer the process of change. This is also the agenda of the Green New Deal, a strategy designed to confront decarbonisation and inequality simultaneously, that is gathering increasing support in both Europe and North America.

At the heart of the just transition lie questions of participation and power. Starting in the labour movement in the 1970s, the just transition has focused on how the interests of workers and communities can be respected as dirty industries are phased out and the clean economy is scaled up. For Paul Nowak, Deputy Secretary General at the Trades Union Congress, this means that workers need to be at the table: “Nothing about us, without us,” he says. Workers have to be involved in climate decisions that will influence their future, they need to have the skills to enable them to thrive and they need to be confident that green jobs are also good ▶