Environmental Labour Studies: Tackling the Jobs - Environment, North - South Contradictions

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Structure

• The climate crisis and labour
• Theoretical reflections on labour, nature and globalisation
• Trade unions facing the dual challenge: research questions
• Strategies to accommodate environmental issues into union policies
• Trade union conflicts across the North/South Divide

Don’t say you were not told ……
Life Magazine, 1962
Projected Impacts of Climate Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Temperature Change (relative to pre-industrial)</th>
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<tr>
<td>0°C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food</td>
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<td>Water</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecosystems</td>
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<td>Extreme Weather Events</td>
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<td>Risk of Abrupt and Major Irreversible Changes</td>
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Direct and Indirect Impacts
- Gradual increase not certain - tipping points
- Interaction effects

Unison Impacts
- Agricultural workers, food processing workers
- Municipal workers
- Fishermen, forest workers
- Emergency service workers, shopworkers

Cumulative CO2 emissions for the period from 1950 to 2000

WHO estimates across four health outcomes: malaria, malnutrition, diarrhoea, and inland flooding fatalities

Point of Departure - Labour and Nature

1. "Labor is the source of wealth and all culture, and since useful labor is possible only in society and through society, the proceeds of labor belong undiminished with equal right to all members of society."

First part of the paragraph: "Labor is the source of all wealth and all culture." in Gotha programme

Labor is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values (...) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power.

Marx, Critique of the Gotha programme, 1875
How to Think about Globalisation

Creating a sense of a unified humanity exposed to the same threats:

- naturalising nature

Insisting on different responsibilities, different needs, necessary development:

- societal reductionism

Labour and Nature: inseparable and irreducible:

- social nature?

Trade Unions Facing the Dual Challenge of Globalising Work Divisions and Globalising Environmental Degradation

Climate change affects workers worldwide but in unequal ways.

- TNCs move to the South where environmental regulations are weaker, working conditions poorer and wage rates lower. Despite constituting a “common enemy” they simultaneously set workers in the North and South in competition with each other.

- Northern unions want protection from cheap and environmentally unsustainable production

- Southern unions don’t want to be the victims of the environmental destruction caused by Northern production/consumption, nor the recipients of Northern waste.

The same conditions that create the necessity for cooperation on a global scale also create conflicting interests, making global solidarity difficult

Research Questions

1. How do Trade Unions see the connections between jobs and the environment on the one hand and the North-South divide on the other?

2. How do they deal with these two tensions?

3. How do international, national and local trade unions cooperate?

4. How do the perspectives and responses of trade unionists differ depending upon their sectoral, national and international levels of responsibility?
Trade Unions and Labour Organisations interviewed

Sustainlabour

Confronting the Contradictions

Strategies to accommodate environmental issues into union policies

Quotes from 2006 Trade Union Assembly of Labour and the Environment, in Nairobi, Kenya – The Importance of International Conferences

Linking the environmental agenda with trade union concerns:
To strengthen the link between poverty reduction, environmental protection and decent work, (…)
To integrate the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development with a rights-based approach.

Redefining the environmental agenda within trade union policies
To link occupational health to environmental and public health policy and practice (…)

Broadening the vision of unionism: Articulating the environmental agenda with a sustainable society
To establish effective and democratic governance to ensure sustainable development and (…)
reinforce the role of national public authorities, to establish the rules necessary to govern global markets and firms (…)

Education
Research
Industrial Action
Dissemination
Towards a ‘Just Transition’

“to create green and decent jobs, transform and improve traditional ones, and include democracy and social justice in environmental decision-making processes” (ITUC, 2009: 10).

1. Policy of ‘Just Transition’ product of a consensus striving process across sectors and North-South divide – creating spaces where differences & difficulties discussed

Nevertheless significant contestations remain:

i. CC taken seriously but sometimes felt CC - framed, defined & solutions proposed by Northern unions

ii. Radical anti-capitalist critique albeit incorporating environmental concerns

iii. Traditional job protection critique

‘The intensification of the process of Ecological Imperialism whereby clean production stays in the north and dirty production is moved to the south is seen as a probable outcome of current frameworks to address climate change.’

Conflicts Across the North/South Divide

2. Forms of North-South solidarity: provide support; political struggle for rights

i. Paternalism versus solidarity

ii. Disenchantment with ITUC/IMF; internationalism as a form of union tourism

“Green jobs are insulting. Steel are brown jobs. You can’t build windmills and aircraft without steel. The steel job is a green job. A rigger is a rigger when he is working in a brown or green job. What is a green boss? A green boss is still a boss. A green capitalist is still a capitalist.”
3. Campaigning for ‘decent’ work in the South

i. Decent work versus survival
ii. Short term certainties versus long term uncertainties

“For us exploitation is better than starvation”

“I’m going to die quicker from having no job than from climate change.”

4. Northern unions concerned to reduce carbon emissions and environmental degradation – through technological innovation. (working with the Environmental Movement, e.g., Blue-Green Alliance)

i. Accentuation of technological inequality (costs, patents) - reduce competitiveness - carbon leakage - perceived need for border adjustment.
ii. Southern perspective: environmental/industrial protectionism rather than environmental concern

“...as we move to a new energy system, we must avoid the possibility of “green protectionism” and “environmental apartheid” replacing existing protectionist measures. ”

5. Protection of the most vulnerable i.e. workers in the South

Workers constructed as victims not as active agents of change (ITUC). Consequence:

i. Prevents solidarity - unequal relationship
ii. Triggers alternative allegiances and strategies
iii. Difficulties in forming South-South alliances
6. Responsibilities and provisions are being developed

i. Some unions do not have health and safety officers; the environment is seen as a luxury – more concerned with saving lives

ii. Where H & S officers exist, they are taking on the environment portfolio – tensions with union and government policies

I mean, we see that the system does not work. And as a union we are fighting with the Government, to say: “Look, you cannot let the perpetrator report himself to the authorities!” I mean, I was giving them an example to say you cannot be a driver of a car, driving in a 60 zone, you find yourself driving at 100. Will you park at the side of the road and phone the traffic cops to say: “Man, I found myself on the wrong side of the law. Come in and issue a ticket and prosecute me!” It doesn’t work. That’s not possible! But now our Government expects their employers to report themselves to them, to say: I have killed so-and-so, I’ve injured so-and-so in the workplace…… I mean, health and safety has not been taken very seriously by the unions in South Africa.

Turning a Crisis into an Opportunity

- Sustainable development is a possibility to build a new project for humanity. Because nobody knows what a sustainable society should look like. So each trade union in the world, each person in the world, each population in the world, has the possibility to express their views and their opinion in order to build this project. … it’s very important to have a real cooperation with other countries and to take into account their demands and not to represent only the arrogance of colonialists. (Jose, France, ETUC)