

# Just Transition, System Change, and Revolutionary Green Transformation<sup>1</sup>



The term “Just Transition” is becoming increasingly prevalent in discussions involving workers, climate change, and post carbon energy economics.

Wikipedia describes **Just Transition** as, “a framework that has been developed by the trade union movement to encompass a range of social interventions needed to secure workers’ jobs and livelihoods when economies are shifting to sustainable production, including avoiding climate change, protecting biodiversity, among other challenges.”

This is particularly timely given the fact that humanity faces a deepening crises due to global warming, brought on by capitalist economic activity centered on a fossil-fuel based economy. In order to prevent the absolute worst case scenarios of what will almost undoubtedly a warming world, at least 80% of the known fossil fuel reserves will need to remain unextracted, and humanity will need to transition to a renewable energy based post-carbon economy. Such a shift will inevitably require a massive transformation of the means of production, likely affecting much of the working class.

Already we’re witnessing the beginnings of major upheaval simply due to the innate characteristics of chaotic capitalist market activity, as 100,000s of workers jobs are imperiled by collapsing coal, oil, and commodities markets worldwide, combined with just the beginnings of a major shift as disruptive technologies such as wind and solar achieve greater and greater share of the mix of energy sources now available.

Furthermore, climate justice and/or environmental activists know—at least intuitively—that the fossil fuel based economy, including all parts of its supply chain must be shut down as rapidly as possible and replaced by ecologically sustainable alternatives, and all attempts at expansion of the fossil fuel based activity must be opposed, by any means necessary, including (but limited to) direct action.

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation: many of the terms, concepts, individuals, and organizations discussed here can be researched in greater depth on the website <http://ecology.iww.org>. Simply enter the item in **boldface** in the search engine on that site for greater information.

In this context, the issue of jobs and just transition has become a major topic. Obviously, shutting down any project cold (even if possible) would result in the loss of jobs performed by the workers, who're not responsible for the activities of their employers (and quite likely do not entirely agree with their employers' motives). Even limiting such projects can *potentially* negatively affect the workers' livelihoods. Given such a threat, it's understandable that these workers would oppose efforts by climate justice and environmental activists to disrupt fossil fuel supply chains.

It's not a new concept.

In 1976 workers at the **Lucas Aerospace** Company in Britain set out to defeat the bosses' plans to axe jobs. They produced their own alternative "Corporate Plan" for the company's future. In doing so they attacked some of the underlying priorities of capitalism. Their proposals were radical, arguing for an end to the wasteful production of military goods and for people's needs to be put before the owners' profits.<sup>2</sup>

One time OCAW vice president, and later secretary-treasurer, **Tony Mazzocchi** first used the term in the 1980s. According to Labor Network for Sustainability co-director, **Jeremy Brecher**,

To provide a just transition for workers harmed by environmental policies, Mazzocchi proposed the idea of a "Superfund for workers." The fund would provide financial support and opportunities for higher education for workers displaced by environmental protection policies. As Mazzocchi put it in 1993, "There is a Superfund for dirt. There ought to be one for workers." He argued that "Paying people to make the transition from one kind of economy—from one kind of job—to another is not welfare. Those who work with toxic materials on a daily basis ... in order to provide the world with the energy and the materials it needs deserve a helping hand to make a new start in life."<sup>3</sup>

Even before that, **IWW** and **Earth First!** organizer **Judi Bari**—who successfully forged the beginnings of alliances between radical Earth First! activists and dissident timber workers against capitalist timber practices in northwestern California—spoke the language of Just Transition, even though she didn't use the term. For example, when people raised the issue of timber workers' jobs and livelihoods as a potentially sticky issue that might arise as a result of preserving the now protected Headwaters Forest old-growth redwood grove in Humboldt County, Bari (in coordination with her timber worker allies) devised the following set of demands that people (including timber workers) could demand of the Maxxam controlled Pacific Lumber Company<sup>4</sup> and the State of California:



“(Estimating that preserving Headwaters Forest would cost 200 jobs total)...the rehabilitation of the Headwaters Complex forest lands...will only create about 100 jobs, based on the estimates of people currently engaged in restoration work. Therefore, we need to offer a way for displaced workers to opt

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Doyle, 1976: “The fight for useful work at Lucas Aerospace” - [http://ecology.iww.org/texts/misc/1976 The fight for useful work at Lucas Aerospace](http://ecology.iww.org/texts/misc/1976%20The%20fight%20for%20useful%20work%20at%20Lucas%20Aerospace)

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Brecher, “A Superfund for Workers”, *Dollars and Sense*, November 2015

<sup>4</sup> Headwaters Forest stood on land then owned by Pacific Lumber; it is currently part of the National Park System.

out of the timber job market. We propose a voluntary option plan for Pacific Lumber workers that includes the following choices:

- Priority hiring for Headwaters restoration jobs, at logger wages.
- Incentives for early retirement.
- Monetary assistance for relocation and job search.
- Scholarships and monetary support for school or retraining.
- Low interest loans for starting small businesses.
- Or, if none of the other options are exercised, a lump sum severance payment.

These options would be offered by seniority, with more value being placed on those options that provide re-employment opportunities and less on the lump sum payment. By offering this option package, the number of people competing for the restoration jobs will be reduced to something in the neighborhood of the 100 jobs available. Although displaced Pacific Lumber workers will have priority for hiring, some non-Pacific Lumber workers with special skills in restoration work may also be hired if necessary.”<sup>5</sup>

Those with union experience (like Bari) will immediately recognize the sort of language that unions use in negotiations with employers over union contract language and/or changing job conditions. It was Bari’s experience as a rank and file union militant that gave her the insights and standing necessary to help Earth First! (in northwestern California, at any rate) develop a class struggle perspective, something that most environmental organizations and movements (including the radical tendencies) have (until recently) sorely lacked.

As capitalism’s ability to continue to “manufacture consent” (using the terminology of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky) has begun to erode, and as the stark reality that capitalism and ecology cannot be reconciled has become much more readily apparent to the 99%, there has been a growing class consciousness among at least some climate justice and environmental activists (though there’s a long way to go, of course).

Many such activists now have begun to recognize that blocking individual pipelines, or opposing the expansion of individual existing fossil fuel projects does not address the root of the problem, and a systemic change is required to succeed. Likewise, in doing so, they recognize the need for a mass based, intersectional, class conscious movement that includes the support of (among others) the very workers engaged in the frontline labor involved in the targeted projects. They also have begun to understand that the employers deliberately pit the workers against the activists, often by lying to these workers, claiming that the environmentalists objectives—no matter how well intentioned—threaten these workers’ very livelihoods (though, of course, these same employers shed not a single tear when *they* lay off, furlough, automate, outsource, or downsize their workforces in far greater numbers than would result from any environmentalists’ activity).<sup>6</sup>

More and more, environmental and/or climate justice activists raise the call for “clean” (or “green”) jobs to replace the dirty fossil fuel related work. They sometimes (rightfully) point out that renewable energy

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<sup>5</sup> Judi Bari, “But What About Jobs?”, leaflet, ca. 1996, available online at <http://ecology.iww.org/texts/Judi-Bari/But%20What%20About%20Jobs%3F> among other sources.

<sup>6</sup> A glaring example of this hypocrisy can be seen in the case of the recent crash in both oil and coal prices worldwide, which has resulted in the loss of over 250,000 oil workers’ jobs and perhaps as many as 1,000,000 or more coal mining jobs, as well as the jobs lost in supportive sectors, including rail, steel, and equipment manufacturing. (During this time, however, the creation of “green” jobs has exceeded the loss of fossil fuel jobs, at least in quantity).

(primarily wind and solar) supply chains employ far more workers' than the fossil fuel supply chain, and as renewable energy usage increases (and fossil fuels, as well as nuclear fission power are phased out), these differences will only become more stratified.

Furthermore, many of the skills possessed by workers employed in the fossil fuel / nuclear power supply chain are entirely or almost entirely transferrable to renewable energy jobs (for example, off shore oil platform workers could easily perform the very similar jobs of maintaining offshore wind turbines. The workboat pilots and deckhands could simply shift from transporting oil workers to wind power workers to and from job sites. Building trades workers will likely perform more or less the same duties no matter what it was they are building).

If entire companies can be repurposed (as was the case of Toyota, which once primarily manufactured weaving looms and now makes cars), workers can be "repurposed" as well.

The problem is that this, by itself, does not represent a "just transition" for the following reasons:

- (1) There is no guarantee that the newly created green jobs will be made available to the workers losing their dirty jobs;
- (2) Even if these jobs are available to said workers, there is no guarantee these workers will be hired in order of their previous seniority, retain the same level of benefits, or receive comparable and commensurate wages;
- (3) Even if the conditions in the previous point are met, since the solar and wind sectors are new, these jobs tend to be nonunion;
- (4) Furthermore, since these new sectors are dominated by for-profit capitalist businesses, newly emerging markets, the stability of these jobs is by no means assured;
- (5) It should also be noted that the production, installation, and maintenance of these "green job" creating facilities and infrastructure may not be entirely green themselves. For example, the supply chain needed to produce this new technology isn't free of pollution or toxic byproducts (though such problems are generally much, much less severe than is the case with conventional, "dirty" job sectors), including that which can adversely affect the workers;
- (6) Likewise, there is no guarantee that these "green jobs" may still happen in an unjust context, for example, the construction of a wind farm on indigenous land without the consent of the peoples there may result in green energy and jobs, but *not* justice;
- (7) These new jobs may also require relocation and uprooting of the workers' and their families from their existing communities.

A "Just Transition" must address all of these challenges, following the example suggested by Judi Bari, above.

Furthermore, these efforts must include representatives (or delegates) of the workers effected by such a transition, otherwise the endeavor will no doubt be seen as outside agitation (and such fears will be stoked by the employers who've every incentive to oppose the transition).<sup>7</sup>

Several groups, both ecological and labor, have attempted to address this problem directly, including the following:

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<sup>7</sup> See Steve Ongerth, "Unions and the Climate Justice Movement", <http://ecology.iww.org/node/1324>, October 7, 2015.



- **Bay Localize** (based in the Bay Area) - <http://www.baylocalize.org/>
- **Climate Workers** (also based in the Bay Area) - <http://www.climateworkers.org/>
- **The IWW Environmental Unionism Caucus** – <http://ecology.iww.org>
- **Labor Network for Sustainability** - <http://www.labor4sustainability.org/>
- **Movement Generation** (also based in the Bay Area) - <http://movementgeneration.org/>
- **One Million Climate Jobs** - <http://www.climate-change-jobs.org/>
- **Trade Unions for Energy Democracy** - <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/>
- **Unions Against Fracking** - <http://unionsagainstfracking.org/>

And several unions called for “Just Transition”, including the United Steelworkers (USW)—into which Mazzocchi’s OCAW merged, AFSCME, HERE, IBEW, IWW, ILWU, National Nurses United, SEIU, Unifor (in Canada), and others—though such calls have been inconsistent.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, the rank and file railroad worker in the organization, **Railroad Workers United** - <http://railroadworkersunited.org/> adopted the following resolution specifically calling for “Just Transition”:

**Whereas**, the continued extraction and combustion of fossil fuels such as coal and oil has been scientifically proven to represent a threat to the environment and the future of the planet; and

**Whereas**, there is a mass movement domestically and globally to radically reduce the continued use of such fuels to power economic development; and

**Whereas**, other alternative energy sources – wind, solar, geothermal, hydroelectric—are developing rapidly and appear to be the wave of the future; and

**Whereas**, railroad corporations have traditionally hauled large amounts of fossil fuel—especially coal—but the future of this traffic appears uncertain or possibly even non-existent within a few decades; and

**Whereas**, the burden of shifting from an economy based on fossil fuels to one based upon renewal energy should not be unfairly born by workers, including railroad workers; and

**Whereas**, to ensure that such a transition to alternative energy does not create an economy of low paid jobs for working people—including railroad workers-whose jobs could conceivably be threatened by such a transition;



<sup>8</sup> Steve Ongerth, Unions and the Climate Justice Movement, IWW Environmental Unionism Caucus, October 7, 2015 - <http://ecology.iww.org/node/1324>

**Therefore, Be it Resolved** that RWU supports a “Just Transition” to an economy based upon renewal and clean energy; and

**Be it further Resolved** that RWU demand workers who are displaced from environmentally destructive industries be provided living wage income and benefits through public sector jobs or a universal basic income; and

**Be it Further Resolved** that RWU demand that workers who are displaced from environmentally destructive industries be provided with commensurate rates of pay and benefits while retraining; and

**Be it Further Resolved** that RWU demands that fossil fuel extraction dependent regions such as Appalachia be locations where investments of alternative energy are made to offset the economic dislocations that workers and communities would face from such a transition; and

**Be it Finally Resolved** that RWU call upon the rail industry and the rail unions to work together to move away from unsustainable practices - specifically the hauling of environmentally destructive commodities--and work towards expanding the railroads’ business prospects in areas such as mail, passengers, trailers and containers, renewal energy components, etc.

(Adopted by vote on April 1, 2016 at convention)

Almost simultaneously, a group of current and former Canadian tar sands workers publically announced a new effort, called **Iron and Earth** - <http://www.ironandearth.org/>, (whose logo graces the top of this document) which calls for a just transition to a renewable energy economy.<sup>9</sup>

The “green jobs” envisioned under most Just Transition scenarios not only include renewable energy workers, but other “green” jobs, including (increased) public transportation workers, (increased) recycling and reuse workers, ecological habitat restoration workers, urban and organic farm workers, and the like.

A further challenge remains, however, and that is that, barring systemic change, even these “green” jobs would still take place under an exploitative and ecologically unsustainable **capitalist** system.<sup>10</sup>

Climate Justice activists, Eco-socialists, and/or Green Syndicalists must, or course, be sure to request clarification on the specific definition of just transition. Any transition that simply attempts to replace exploitative jobs under fossil fuel capitalism with wage slavery under an allegedly “green” capitalism will neither be just, nor will it likely be much of an actual transition (and, given capitalism’s innate tendency to externalize negative consequences and its “grow or die” imperative, ecological capitalism is inherently impossible).

It’s true that there are more jobs to be had under a renewable energy based economy than there are under a fossil fuel based economy, but capitalism cannot tolerate full employment (it depends on a “reserve army of labor to depress wages).

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<sup>9</sup> According to Iron and Earth members, the effort has been discussed informally among tar sands workers for over a year now.

<sup>10</sup> It is beyond the scope of this document to demonstrate the unsustainability of capitalism. There are numerous sources available on that subject available on <http://ecology.iww.org> and elsewhere, argued from either Marxist and Anarchist perspectives (or both).



And while many studies demonstrate the feasibility of a 100% or near 100% renewable energy (and motive power) based economy within the next half century (or sooner under some more optimistic scenarios), such energy (and motive power) systems will be far more decentralized and distributed. Capitalism tends towards centralization of resources into fewer and fewer hands, however, and therefore the capitalist class will resist attempts at decentralization of economic (and energy) power into the hands of the many. In fact, this is already taking place as Investor Owned Utilities have pushed back against feed-in-tariffs and other programs designed to encourage the spread of distributed energy systems.

Lastly, it cannot be forgotten that everyone deserves a right livelihood and access to the means of production; one cannot simply limit their focus to the workers directly affected by climate justice demands, but must also include all of the non-capitalist class, because, surely, capitalism affects all. Likewise, Just Transition in one isolated incidence does not address the need for universal systemic change and workers' control of the means of production. Just Transition can be a start, but by itself, it's not sufficient to be the finish.

Therefore, there can be no truly "just" transition unless it involves the dismantling of capitalism in favor of ecologically sustainable economic democracy. Such a transformation would have to be deep and radical and necessitate a transition to one form of ecosocialism or another. Capitalism and Just Transition are ultimately incompatible with each other.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, Michael Ware, 'What kind of "just transition"?', Socialist Worker, December 1, 2015 (<http://ecology.iww.org/node/1410>); Stefania Barca, "Labor in the Age of Climate Change: Any just transition to a green economy must take place on labor's terms — not capital's.", Jacobin, March 18, 2016 (<http://ecology.iww.org/node/1568>); and Trish Kahle, "Austerity vs. the Planet: The Future of Labor Environmentalism", Dissent, Spring 2016 (<http://ecology.iww.org/node/1607>).