

Comment on the TUED 'Trade Unions and Just Transition' Working Paper No.11

Introduction -The Greener Jobs Alliance is a Trades Union for Energy Democracy (TUED) supporter. We have identified Just Transition as a priority area as part of our work in the UK needed to ensure the implementation of union policy following the TUC Climate Change motion of 2017. This contained the '*demand that just transition is integral to industrial strategy.*'

We therefore welcome the TUED paper as part of a vital debate that needs to take place. The paper contains some excellent analysis and we would urge anyone interested in the 'The Search for a Transformative Politics' (the paper's sub-heading) to read it

<http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/resources/tued-publications/tued-working-paper-11-trade-unions-and-just-transition-the-search-for-a-transformative-politics/>

This critique of the paper from individual members of the GJA is designed as part of the ongoing discussions needed to move this forward within the trade union movement.

Social Power or Social Dialogue? - The paper contrasts 'Social Power' against the 'Social Dialogue' approach advocated by the International and European TUCs. We believe that this is a false framing of the question. Reading the TUED paper you could be excused for thinking that it is wrong to call for more social dialogue as it is simply propping up a failing system. In fact, the GJA thinks it is correct to call for more social dialogue but 'without illusions'. That is why we advocate it from workplace level and the appointment of workplace environment reps, through to national level and the establishment of a Just Transition Commission.

<https://i2.wp.com/www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ITStatement-Thumb.png>

There is also a worrying exaggeration of the Social Power model. '*We believe this emerging "Social Power" approach is already in the ascendency across the trade union movement, and is increasingly finding common cause with, and being reinforced by the energy and creativity of major social movements that share similar perspectives and goals.*' (Page 4) **If only this was true.** While this may be the case in some unions and in some parts of the world, it is far from universal and has gone into reverse in many countries.

The history of the trade union movement shows that unions can use social power to strengthen social dialogue and vice versa. Social dialogue doesn't exist in isolation and unions are often able to gain more concessions when social dialogue is backed up by militant action particularly in periods of heightened social conflict. Social dialogue is at its weakest when social power is on the decline.

Social Power – what does it mean? - 'Social Power' is a very vague concept. It's a term that has even been employed in the 'big society' approach of the Tories in the UK through 'empowering local communities etc'. In other words, it can mean different things to different people. Just referring to it as a 'transformational strategy' doesn't take us much further. '*Unions must then develop transformational strategies that are anchored in a paradigm of **sharing, solidarity, and sufficiency.** This is perhaps the only way to ensure a Just Transition for workers, and survival for human society as a whole.*' (Page 43)

It is hard to take issue with the 3 'S's' identified but they don't represent a political strategy. A 4th 'S' - '**Socialism**' - has gone missing. It is not referenced once in the whole paper other than in an historical context (Page 34). The paper refers to the fact that *JT 'cannot be accomplished without a deep restructuring of the global political economy'* and that '*.....proponents of Social Dialogue sometimes go to great lengths to avoid the issue*' (Page 42). However, the authors could be accused of avoiding the 'politics' of political economy by failing to mention the ideological underpinning of how an economy should be structured. The closest we come to this kind of ideological reference is

that there should be *'a radical shift in policy away from market-focused approaches and toward public and social ownership and democratic control of key economic sectors such as energy.'* (Page 42). There is a passing reference to the public and social ownership of the financial sector *'taking control of and reorganizing the dominant sectors of the economy, including finance.'* (Page 33) The paper needs a more thorough analysis of the link between finance and the transformation. The logic of the position taken in the paper is that this is crucial to deliver the financing of the transition at the speed required and yet it is not explored. 'Social Power' without a budget is not a credible option. This is referred to as *'a post-capitalist future'* (Page 34) but there is no real sense of how this will be achieved and what post-capitalism will consist of. The institutions of state power on which capitalism is based are not addressed. The slogan 'System change not Climate Change' requires a much clearer definition of the kind of 'system' we want to put in place.

Social Democracy or Socialism? - Socialism is of course a word that has been cruelly abused both in theory and practice, but it still represents the ideological basis on which to create a vision for the future. The weakness of the paper in this respect is most clearly represented in the assertion that combatting climate change is *'not essentially a matter of ideology; it is a matter of survival that should transcend ideological preferences and histories, whether they reside in unions or other social movements'* (Page 34) This is naive and contradicts the ideological analysis present in the paper. It would benefit from a much clearer ideological approach.

This confusion on ideology is compounded by the suggestion that *'It should not be assumed that an alternative to Social Dialogue must necessarily entail an exclusive endorsement of social, class or industrial conflict'* (Page 31). This is a strange statement which seems to place the approach outside the dynamics of class struggle.

In fact, it could be argued that the paper **does** adopt an ideological approach under the heading *Reviving Social Democracy* claiming that *'Finding an **alternative to Social Dialogue** can therefore be seen as part of the **effort to reconstitute social democracy both ideologically and politically'*** (Page 34). If the track record of social dialogue delivering transformation is poor, then the record of social democracy is even poorer. Social dialogue and social democracy have been joined at the hip for over 100 years in the UK.

Just Transition as a 'transitional demand' - Just Transition is itself a 'transitional demand' between capitalism and socialism **because capitalism can't deliver it**. That doesn't mean the labour movement should not demand it and try to implement it by supporting 'social dialogue' where it exists and calling for it where it doesn't. At the same time highlighting the limitations and using the process to expose these. Social dialogue is most effective when linked to popular mobilisation.

Conclusion - The stark reality is that climate change is far higher up the agenda of many multi-nationals and financial institutions than most trades unions in the UK. That is why it is crucial that the TUC motion is acted upon and not buried underneath a mass of competing priorities. This is borne out by the recent ETUC research 'Involving unions in climate action to build a just transition'. It reveals that the main barrier confronting unions in decarbonisation strategies is the 'lack of priority' of the issue within the union.

<https://www.etuc.org/en/publication/involving-trade-unions-climate-action-build-just-transition-guide-video> The TUED paper provides an important contribution to the debate on the role of trades unions and climate change. The movement needs to engage with this quickly if we are to avoid a situation where the word 'just' disappears from the transition process.

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