

Trade Unions and Labour-Environmentalism Study Network

This cross-national and interdisciplinary network exists to further the study of trade unions and labour-environmentalism. Responding to rising scholarly interest and the contemporary debates regarding the role and function of trade unions in climate politics and the transition to a low-carbon economy (Rathzel et al, 2021; Douglas et al, 2023; Kleinheisterkamp-Gonzalez, 2023), the purpose of the network is to make intellectual and ideological interventions into the theory, practice and policy of trade union environmentalism in advanced capitalist economies. As our network grows, we hope to expand the focus to include workers in the Global South. Networks already exist that revolve around the concept of labour ecologies¹ (Barth & Littig, 2021; Barca, 2018; inter alia) which focus on the actions of both paid and unpaid workers and individuals that shape the relationship between nature and society. Simultaneously, other groups strive to enhance and popularise climate activism within the working class by fostering meaningful discussions and collaborations between working-class organisations and professional climate NGOs and movements² - following in the footsteps of the older cross-movement coalition building literature (Tattersall, 2010; Obach, 2004; inter alia). More recent currents within the literature, referred to as environmental labour studies, have also sought to 'mend the breach' between labour and nature to show how they are 'intrinsically linked and equally threatened by global capital' (Stavis et al, 2018; Uzzell & Rathzel, 2013).

Complimenting these themes, TULE specifically focuses on working-class environmentalism as it is expressed through the trade union movement: the rationale behind this focus is to explore the latent power of trade unions as opposed to their realised power today (Holgate, 2021) and to provoke a discussion on the prospects for trade union environmentalism, which we take to refer to a working-class environmentalism as expressed through the labour movement. Our reasons to be cheerful include the belief that the historic weakness of contemporary labour movements in advanced capitalist societies is not the same as a historic defeat (Silver, 2003, 2014). Furthermore, as their history shows, trade unions have not sought to avoid difficult conversations about emancipatory struggles - ranging from feminist struggles to anti-racist campaigns within their ranks (Rowbotham, 1972; Virdee, 2000) - and responded to previous economic transformations (Coates & Topham, 1974; Cohen, 2006; Holgate, 2021).

However, all is not that straightforward. We understand trade unions, and trade unionism, to be complex and often contradictory entities. Trade unions both express and contain worker resistance to capitalism by acting as agencies of accommodation and conflict, and trade unionism is as much a product of capitalist society as it is a reaction to it (Anderson, 1967; Hyman, 1975; Kelly, 1988; Darlington, 2014). This complex duality is an expression of power and conflict in work and society under capitalism (Hyman, 1989), and serves as an important reminder that trade unions are 'protagonists' in political, economic and social arenas (Hyman, 2001; Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010). Moreover, despite being class organisations trade unions organise on a sectional basis, with the syndicalist ambition of 'one big union' now a historical memory - the hope of a radical green syndicalism (Shantz, 2004) has never fully materialised. The tension that characterises the relationship between trade unions and the state is also notable. Stuck between acting as guarantors of social peace and agitating against government policy-making, the trade unions have often been repressed by legal methods or state violence, or else courted as valued social partners (Kelly, 1998).

¹ <https://psaenvironment.wordpress.com/guest-blog-ecologies-of-labour/>

² <https://workingclassclimatealliance.com/about-us-2/>

These complexities, tensions and contradictions have a significant bearing upon the prospects for trade unionism in the context of climate politics, at a regional, national and global level (Felli, 2014; Thomas & Doerflinger, 2020; Thomas & Pulignano, 2021). The climate crisis has historically been used as an opportunity to expose and threaten the allegedly productivist orientation of trade unionism, or the top-down, bureaucratic structures of trade unions (Gorz, 1967; Porritt, 1984). These critiques have also focused upon the class character of trade unionism, dismissing organised labour - as expressed through the trade union movement - as a relic of the past, to be replaced with new social movements (Mouffe & Laclau, 1985; Bookchin, [1969] 2004; see also Heery, 2018). Even those sympathetic to trade unions have called into question existing practices, identities and ideologies of trade unionism: some have argued that trade unionism requires a profound transformation (Barca, 2015) or a rethink of the aims and objectives that animate the trade union movement if it is to realise its full ecological potential (Barry, 2013).

Against this pessimism, others have more optimistically viewed the climate crisis as an opportunity to rediscover the ecological potential for trade unionism through a renewed focus on working-class agency, whether that be in the organising potential of the Just Transition agenda - in opposition to attempts by governments and corporations to defang its radical ambitions (Sweeny & Treat, 2018; Varoufakis & Adler, 2020; McIlroy et al, 2022) - or as carriers of a 'proletarian ecology', where trade unionism is a 'sword of climate justice' (Hampton, 2014; Hampton, 2018; Huber, 2022). It is at this juncture - which echoes Hyman's (1971) distinction between an optimistic and pessimistic view of trade unionism - in which we locate our contribution. Whilst more aligned with the 'optimistic' accounts of trade union environmentalism, we do not uncritically ascribe to trade unions a messianic role in climate politics, nor believe they are historically determined to act in one way or another. Instead, we intend this network to explore further the successes, failures and future potentials that trade unions hold for the climate crisis. It is our ambition to better understand the empirical and normative limits and possibilities of trade union environmentalism to identify both emancipatory opportunities and political dead-ends.

Drawing upon the insights of political theory, historical sociology, political economy, labour geographies and critical labour studies, we focus upon 4 pillars of investigation which present an innovative research agenda at the cutting edge of scholarship on trade unionism and climate politics:

1. Reorientating Trade Unionism: Identities and Ideologies
 - Does trade unionism require a profound transformation to respond meaningfully and effectively to the climate crisis? This pillar examines the forms and variations of trade union environmentalism, and what this means for existing identities, ideologies and strategies of trade unions.
2. Just Transition: Policies and Practices
 - What is the future of Just Transition? This pillar critically examines the contemporary deployment of Just Transition, and the strategies, tactics and policies associated with it, to distinguish between its radical potential and mainstream use today which runs the risk of being depoliticised and coopted by governments and corporations.
3. Realist Utopianism: Imaginations, Work and Industry
 - What use for the political imagination? This pillar focuses upon the emancipatory opportunities inherent in our imaginations, as well as reclaiming contested historical memories to frame interpretations of climate politics and trade unionism.

4. Trade Unions, the Environment and Capitalist Labour Process

- As social activities, work and production can be organised in different ways and produce different outcomes. This pillar examines the distinctive challenges that the climate crisis presents to the organisation of work, by employing a relational analysis of class power and climate politics at the point of production.

This network was co-founded by Ewan Kerr (Glasgow Caledonian University), Damian McIlroy (Queen's University Belfast) and Vinnie Collins (York University) during November 2023, in a London pub after a Historical Materialism conference panel. Guinness has plenty to answer for.