

Momentum 18: Klasse

Track #10: Ökologie und die soziale Frage

Research Paper Abstract (Master thesis)

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Class and environmentalism in the UK – trade unions in the energy sector

Trade unions, as the bastions of worker rights in the class struggle, have historically fought for workers in the societal realm. However, workers movements have a more complicated relationship to environmental issues. The middle-class British environmental movement, from its very inception during the Industrial Revolution on the other hand, has always had a class problem. In a country as hierarchical and class-based as the UK, is there scope for worker-environmentalist solidarity for a social-ecological transformation, a 'Just Transition' to sustainability?

Human-induced changes to Earth System processes are the product of industrialisation: the exponential increase in society's material throughput and fossil-based energy use since the Industrial Revolution. These changes (including climate change) already pose a threat to humanity and will continue to do so with increased force and severity. The poorest in society who are most vulnerable to change will be the most affected by these developments – both globally, and within countries. It is clear that both an energy and a material climb-down are inevitable, whether by design or by sheer (natural) force.

Within the current neoliberal capitalist regime, societies are additionally faced with many short(er) term problems in the societal and economic spheres, which removes immediacy from the long(er) term issues of environmental change. The current politically fraught situation of trade unions in the UK, including a declining and aging membership, provides an undercurrent of urgency to the topic. How do trade unions in the UK negotiate the difficult challenge of squaring the short-term immediate aims of their members with the long-term aim of broad socio-ecological development – including social welfare and a habitable environment? Could trade union revitalisation and an environmental focus under the Just Transition umbrella provide a new focus and lease of life to trade unionism?

To explore these questions, four in-depth semi-structured expert interviews were undertaken with trade union officials and union policy makers. Trade unions in the highly-polluting energy sector, where the long- versus short-term struggle is the most crystallised was specifically chosen for this research, in order to best explore and understand this dynamic. Although trade unions have been in decline in the UK since the late-1970s, the 'Just Transition' campaign offers a chance to both revitalise trade unions and to face up to the long-term challenges confronting society. This however requires both unity in the currently fractured UK trade union movement, a reorganisation of the way in which trade unions function at present, and how they aim to increase their power and influence.