

Just (?) transitions? The case of the Enel plant in Piombino

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1. Introduction

Our contribution starts from the observation of Rosemberg, an advisor to the International Trade Union Confederation, that since the COP21 in Paris the original meaning of “just transition” has been co-opted “by less socially inclined interests” (Morena et al., 2019, p. 53). The labour movement’s efforts for a just transition, since their beginning in 1980s in the USA, have increased the popularity of the term and brought to its adoption by the international climate policy negotiations as well as by businesses and other organisations. Consequently, a multitude of understandings of “just transition” has arisen. However, while the original intention of the union movement was to re-introduce social justice in climate action and strategies, and overcome the labour versus nature dualism, it is not always clear what social justice conceptualizations are behind the multiple uses of the “just transition” term.

Thus, our main question is: How are (industrial) transitions considered just? Which justice conceptualizations can be identified in different just transition strategies?

Research is emerging that maps and identifies varieties of “just transitions”, in order to bring clarity on the concept (Stavis and Felli, 2016; Morena et al., 2018; Kreinin, 2020). Actors launching initiatives under the term “just transition” expanded from the initial labour movement to now also public and transnational institutions. So, the European Union has been developing the Just Transition Fund, as one of the instruments in the context of its Green Deal. Further, also businesses are cultivating efforts for a just transition. An example of latter is the Futur-e project, by the multinational power utility Enel, of which the Italian government is the main shareholder (WRI, 2021).

Futur-e is one of the steps by which the company is aiming to reach carbon-neutrality by 2050, a commitment announced in 2015. The project involves 23 fossil-fuelled power plants (coal, oil, combined cycle and gas) and one mine, all to be repurposed. The overall transition is estimated to affect 68 000 workers with 44% based in Italy (WRI, 2021; Rugiero, 2019). The overall project has been presented as part of the just transition strategy, developed by the company with trade unions. Measures targeting affected workers include for instance early retirement incentives, training and reskilling or relocation agreements. Besides these employee centred measures, Enel also engaged with local governments, businesses and communities to identify options for reuse of Enel’s existing buildings and assets. This process should ensure promotion of innovation, further job creation and achieving a more circular economy at the converted sites. Thus, the World Resource Institute and scholars associated with ETUI (WRI, 2021; Enel, 2020; Rugiero, 2019) have pointed it out as just transition example.

2. Case study

This paper is focusing on Enel’s thermoelectric plant in Piombino, a city in Tuscany, and one of the 24 plants involved in Futur-e. The area is characterised by the second largest steel works in Italy after Taranto (known for the environmental conflict around the Ilva steel plant). Piombino is also one of the 42 Sites of National Interests, i.e. areas highly polluted due to anthropic activities. At the same time, next to the Enel steel plant, there is a natural area

protected as WWF oasis. The plant was closed in 2015 and the redevelopment plan is not yet finalized. Ideas include touristic, commercial or potentially maritime activities and an innovative agriculture site (Rugiero, 2019).

3. Our analysis

In line with efforts mapping just transitions, we want to link theoretical reflections on what a just transition is to an empirical analysis of the case, since it has been presented as just transition example. For this purpose, we study the case of the Enel thermoelectric plant in Piombino. The review of academic and grey literature is complemented with interviews to shed light on the transition process. The aim is to investigate to what extent the case can be considered an example of just transition, on the grounds of varieties of just transition conceptualizations. This will include an evaluation of impacts occurring outside of the converted plant, such as for the region, along the supply chain and in other sectors. Deriving from this analysis, we will formulate key policy recommendations for successful transitions which go beyond the plant itself and can offer guidance on the way to a systemic just transition, within industrial policy agendas.

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