

Problematising Just Transition in Scotland

Franziska Paul and Andrew Cumbers
University of Glasgow



Structure of Presentation

Part 1

- Just transition: a brief (family) history of the idea
- Problematising just transition narratives

Part 2

- The Scottish context
- Problematising (just) transition in Scotland

Part 1: Family Dynamics



History of ideas

- Just transition v.1
- Environmental justice
- Climate justice
- Energy justice
- Just transition v.2



Image source (top): Mark Johnstone / Flickr <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tobanblack/4806556008>

Image source (middle): Fred Murphy, <https://wp.wvu.edu/ejatwestern/2021/06/11/possible-actions-to-fight-against-environmental-toxins-and-racism/>

Image source (bottom): <https://odi.org/en/insights/just-transition-in-2025/>

History of ideas I

- **Just transition v.1, 1970s**
 - Initially issue-based: US trade unions formulating just transition demands in response to health and employment impacts from both environmental harms and regulation (air and water pollution)
 - US activist Toni Mazzocchi's idea for a 'Superfund for Workers' turned into initial just transition campaigning efforts
 - Then becomes labour and trade union strategy to highlight social, economic and health costs for workers, and to build initial alliances with environmental actors
 - "Good jobs, not just green jobs"

History of ideas II

- **Environmental justice**, 1980s, also initially issue-based
 - Unequal, racialised impacts of environmental pollution (toxic waste) on communities (e.g. Warren County, NC)
 - 'Merger of environmental and civil rights movements' (Schlosberg and Collins 2014), grassroots participation with limited involvement by unions/ labour
- **Climate justice**, 1990s, building on environmental justice ideas
 - Environment and climate were increasingly understood as necessary conditions for achieving social (and economic) justice
 - UNFCCC process gaining momentum
 - Importantly, rejection of neoliberal approaches (carbon markets, trading/ offsetting, reparations/ financial support to Global South) alongside rejections of fossil fuels and carbon-based energies

History of ideas III

- **Energy justice**, late 2000s, diversification of movement
 - ‘Issue specific’ initiatives and concerns emerging out of wider EJ/CJ thinking and movement building
 - Energy justice (and ‘cousin movements’ energy autonomy, energy sovereignty) putting forward just energy transition ideas and (re)discovering the concept of **just transition (v.2)** in the process
 - Aims: promoting alternative local/ community generated RE (wind, solar) and reducing harmful impacts of corporate fossil fuel and carbon-based energy on communities and planet
 - Impact on carbon-based workers becomes point of contestation

History of ideas IV

- **Just transition v.2**, late 2000s/2010s and ongoing
 - Term ‘rediscovered’ by union movement and applied to discussions on energy transition and wider low-carbon restructuring (e.g. UK’s TUC 2008)
 - Lobbying by union actors and negotiators, and led by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), pays off: term included in the Preamble of Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 (COP21)
 - However, definition has since widened, more community focussed (e.g. ILO def) – ‘societal need to have a just transition to a low-carbon economy’
 - Increasingly appears in global policy discourse (from environmental orgs, climate justice orgs to green NGOs, OECD & WTO) → co-opted?

ProblematISING Just Transition Narratives I

- Two central tensions in emergent discourse
 - 1) JT (volume 2) becomes top-down policy discourse of something that is done to workers rather than which they have agency and power in shaping
 - 2) In part a reaction to first point – labour agency in transition reduced narrowly to focus on transferring existing industrialised carbon-based workforce towards opportunities and jobs in emergent post-carbon energy sectors. This is important, but...

ProblematISING Just Transition Narratives II

- More radical alternative and holistic societal discourse need around post carbon future, but also less profit centred growth economy needed
 - Re-engagement/ re-connection with justice as well as ownership/ democracy concerns
- Potential diversity of work forms in new socio-ecological post carbon economy

How do we situate Scotland and the wider North Sea energy region within these narratives and tensions?

Part 2: Scotland



Putting Scottish energy transition in context I

- UK multi-scalar but still highly centralized political economy
- Scotland, as a devolved nation, holds a unique position – some independent parliamentary powers but still constrained on key issues
 - With regard to economy, employment and energy, policy still overwhelmingly centred in London and UK Government
- Historically, key policy and decisions around energy driven by powerful actors and players outside Scotland (finance capital, UK Treasury, MNCs)

Putting Scottish energy transition in context II

- Reaction and resistance to failures of North Sea oil policy drives Scottish Independence demands from late 1960s onwards
- Earlier critiques and literature on uneven geography of North Sea oil and failure to make transition (particularly for heavy industrial and engineering regions such as Scotland and North East England)
- Similar dynamics at play in post-carbon energy transition?

Putting Scottish energy transition in context II

- Politically (seemingly?) more progressive than its neighbours (particularly England)
 - History of pro-European and Nordic ambitions (Pro-EU, Wellbeing Economy, just transition commitments, etc)
- Globally ambitious climate and transition targets, enabled, in part by progressive mobilising by labour and environmental coalition (e.g. through the Just Transition Partnership)
- Scottish Government has been created with some limited powers but does it use effectively to promote its Just Transition narrative?

State of (just) transition in Scotland

Major issues:

- Scotland is no longer on track to meet 75% reduction targets by 2030, climate targets scrapped in April 2024
- Damning report by Just Transition Commission (2023)
- Green jobs are not materialising as promised (STUC 2024) and most 'green'/ LCRE investment is not flowing back to communities
- ScotWind (seabed leasing) auction significantly undervalued
- Outside interests still dominate debate, e.g. Rosebank (oil field) struggle in Scottish courts (Equinor)

State of (just) transition in Scotland

However,

- Institutionalisation of JT allows space to push for more progressive and transformational politics
 - Just Transition Commission, now nearing end of second iteration (first 2019-2021, second 2021-2026)
- Importantly, (some) workers are reclaiming a version of just transition narratives with clear socio-economic and ecological ambitions (FOES 2023 – Our Power report)

THE DEMANDS

OUR TRANSITION

Solutions for the immediate barriers workers face to moving into renewable industries.

DEMAND 1

WORKERS AT THE CENTRE OF TRANSITION PLANNING

DEMAND 2

CLEAR, ACCESSIBLE PATHWAYS OUT OF HIGH CARBON JOBS

DEMAND 3

A TRAINING REGIME BUILT TO KEEP WORKERS SAFE INSTEAD OF FOR PROFIT

DEMAND 4

INVEST IN DOMESTIC MANUFACTURING AND ASSEMBLY FOR RENEWABLES

I.

II.

OUR RIGHTS

Solutions to ensure work in renewables is secure, well-paid and safe.

DEMAND 5

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING WITH STRONG RANK AND FILE UNIONS ACROSS THE WHOLE OFFSHORE INDUSTRY

DEMAND 6

ESTABLISH UNIVERSAL RIGHTS AND A WAGE FLOOR ACROSS THE UKCS

DEMAND 7

EFFECTIVE AND TRUSTED WHISTLEBLOWING PROCEDURES

III.

OUR ENERGY

Solutions for a new energy system, where benefits are shared fairly and there is greater public control.

DEMAND 8

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

DEMAND 9

REORGANISE THE TAX SYSTEM FOR PUBLIC GOOD

DEMAND 10

NO COMMUNITY LEFT BEHIND

