Trade unions and climate politics: prisoners of neoliberalism or swords of climate justice?

6 March 2015

Paper presented to the Political Studies Association Conference 2015, Sheffield, 30 March 2015

Dr Paul Hampton
Head of Research and Policy
Fire Brigades Union
paul.hampton@fbu.org.uk
07740403240
02084811511

Dr Paul Hampton is Research and Policy Officer at the Fire Brigades Union. He is the author of numerous publications, including Lessons of the 2007 Floods - the FBU’s contribution to the Pitt review (2008), Climate Change: Key issues for the fire and rescue service (2010) and Inundated: Lessons of recent flooding for the fire and rescue service (2015). He holds a PhD in climate change and employment relations, focusing on the role of trade unions in tackling global warming. His book, Workers and Unions for Climate Solidarity is due to be published by Routledge this year.

This is a work in progress. Please do not quote or distribute.
Introduction

The early decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed the failure of climate change politics. The failure is not principally with the physical science evidence for climate change, which as a scientific hypothesis is increasingly robust, although still evolving and variously contested. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports articulate the widely-held but conservative consensus around the physical science of climate change: the climate system is now warming significantly and is likely to continue, human activities are the major cause of it and potentially large impacts are likely (IPCC 2013).

The fifth IPCC report predicts significant increases in surface warming and sea level by the end of this century. It identifies ‘severe, widespread and irreversible’ impacts on natural systems, water resources, species, crop yields, human health, social processes (including gender, class, ethnicity, age and disability), extreme weather, poverty and violent conflicts at global, regional, national and local scales (IPCC 2014). The IPCC suggests a range of technologies and measures to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, along with steps to adapt to extreme weather and other current effects.

Rather, the failure is first of all political. Climate change politics proceeds on the basis of ‘an extraordinarily limited understanding of the social world’ and is for the most part ‘untouched by theoretical debate of any kind at all’ (Shove 2010: 278). The dominant climate frames are ‘an expert and elitist discourse in which peoples, societies, citizens, workers, voters and their interests, views and voices are very much neglected’. Climate politics often concentrates on the post-hoc consequences and ‘ignores the conditions and causes which produce and reproduce the climatic (and other) problems’ (Beck 2010: 254-5, 260). The Stern Review contains ‘no analysis of power or of the tense nature of international relations’. In short ‘we have no politics of climate change’ (Giddens 2009: 201, 4).

Swyngedouw (2010: 219, 223) is scathing about the hegemonic framings of climate change, which invoke ‘a common condition or predicament, the need for common humanity-wide action [and] mutual collaboration’. There are no social tensions or internal generative conflicts: global humanity is called into being as political subject, thereby ‘disavowing the radical
heterogeneity and antagonisms that cut through “the people”. Climate change discourse does not currently have a ‘positively embodied name or signifier; it does not call a political subject into being that stands in for the universality of egalitarian democratic demands’. Climate change challenges the dominant political economy all the way down, hence the demand for a radical reframing by many climate activists.

Mature political science requires a mode of analysis and corresponding social ontology ‘capable of reconciling structural and agential factors within a single explanation’. Structure and agency is not so much a problem as ‘a language by which ontological differences between contending accounts might be registered’. Structure includes context and refers to the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning, while agency refers to action, specifically political conduct. Agency can be defined as ‘the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realise his or her intentions’ (Hay 2002: 113, 91-4). The relevance of structure and agency to climate politics has been recognised by some scholars (Berkhout and Hertin 2000; McLaughlin and Dietz 2008; Okereke, Bulkeley and Schroeder 2009). However this has not resulted in greater clarity about the structures that might constrain or enable action, nor which agents might constitute the privileged subject of change.

The dominant approach to climate change frames the physical science evidence (distilled by the IPCC) within already established economic and political assumptions. The political economy of carbon is increasingly conducted by, through and for markets (Newell and Paterson 2009; ibid 2010). The orientation towards markets is a neoliberal approach. Among the central elements of neoliberalism is a ‘near worship of the “self-regulating market”’, a market ‘increasingly wide in its geographic scope, comprehensive as the governing mechanism for allocating all goods and services, and central as a metaphor for organising and evaluating institutional performance’. Neoliberalism involves minimally ‘the subjection of more-and-more areas of social and environmental life to the logics of capital accumulation’ (Heynen et al 2007: 15). Nordhaus (2008: 22) sums up this approach in pithy fashion: ‘Whether someone is serious about tackling the global-warming problem can be readily gauged by listening to what he or she says about the carbon price.’ This is reflected in market mechanisms such as the European Union’s Emissions Trade Scheme (EU ETS) and in national government policies.
Mol, Spaargaren and Sonnenfeld (2009) identify ecological modernisation as a distinct framing within environmental sociology and politics. The theory necessarily involves the ‘active engagement’ of the state, requiring ‘strategic planning and the promotion of structural change at the macroeconomic level’ (Murphy and Gouldson 2000: 35). Mol and Jänicke (2009: 19) argue that in stronger versions of ecological modernisation, a range of state and non-state actors such as ‘producers, insurance companies, consumers, retailers, unions, credit institutions and market institutions’ are considered capable of working for environmental reform. Another distinctive feature of ecological modernisation is its engagement with important aspects of climate justice. This applies to both procedural justice, meaning the degree of recognition and participation of different actors; and distributive justice, which refers to the distribution of the beneficial and adverse effects of climate change and adaptation (Adger, Paavola and Huq 2006). Barry and Paterson (2004: 767) argue that although the Blair-led Labour government promoted the neoliberal globalisation for British political economy, its environmental policies were ‘best understood as an attempt to implement something like an ecological modernisation agenda’.

A third approach was pioneered by the Marxist geographer Neil Smith, who advanced the apparently scandalous proposal that ‘labour is the ontological key to understanding how nature is produced’ (Smith 2011: 262). This focus on productive activity was a ‘politically inspired move’ aimed at placing labour at the centre of ecological politics (Ekers and Loftus 2013: 235). The foremost metaphor in contemporary Marxist framings of nature-society relations mediated by labour is the notion of metabolism (Schmidt 1971; Foster 2000). Metabolism suggests a dialectical interdependence between nature and society, and is used in three senses: to define how labour mediates the relationship between society and nature; to describe how class societies generate metabolic rifts in the ecology of the earth; and to outline the systemic conditions necessary for metabolic restoration (Burkett 1999). This Capital-centric Marxism contributes insight into the political economy of climate change, highlighting both the structural drivers that cause climate change (in drives for profitable capital accumulation) and identifying key social actors in the process, particularly the role of workers in affecting political economic action.
Trade unions are regarded as quintessential class agents, although not necessarily as purveyors of a fully class-conscious outlook. Flanders (1970: 15) perceived the tension between trade unions functioning as a ‘vested interest’ and their role as ‘swords of justice’. Trade unionism generates a series of contradictions, for example between conflictual oppositionists and cooperative partners. Hyman (2001: 3-4) attempts to capture the variable geometry of trade unionism: whether unions are a bargaining agent, a social partner, a mobiliser of discontent, or all of these at one and the same time. He argued that trade unions face in three directions. As associations of employees, they are concerned to regulate the wage labour relationship, the work performed and payments received. Unions cannot ignore the market. But as organisations of workers, they embody a conception of collective identity that divides them from employers. Whether or not they endorse an ideology of class division and class opposition, ‘unions cannot escape a role as agencies of class’. Yet unions also exist and function within a social framework, which they may aspire to change but which constrains their current choices. Survival necessitates ‘coexistence with other institutions and other constellations of interest’. Unions are part of society.

Hyman points to three major ideal types of European trade unions: towards the market, society and class. In the first, unions are perceived as labour market institutions engaged in collective bargaining; in the second, unions focus on improving workers conditions and status in society, advancing social justice and equality; and in the third, they are schools of class conflict in the struggle between capital and labour. He illustrated these with reference to employment relations in Britain, Germany and Italy. Hyman (2012) accepts that his conception was a stylised model, which necessarily oversimplified and underplayed differentiation between trade unions within any national context. However the framing provides a useful heuristic for evaluating trade union engagement with climate change.

The relevance of Hyman’s model for ecological questions has been noted (Räthzel and Uzzell 2011). Hyman’s model can be extended by mapping the ecological and climate discourses onto trade unions. This mapping associates neoliberal climate discourse with the market pole; ecological modernisation with the social integration pole; and the Marxist perspective with the class pole (see Figure 1). Using this model, it is possible to deepen our understanding of the policies, behaviours and practices of trade unions with respect to climate change.
Trade unions are now beginning to receive some scholarly attention as climate actors, after a long period of neglect. Although a principal social agent in the labour process, trade unions have largely been ignored in climate debates (Perry 2013). Trade union leaders and their members’ conceptualise climate change using a variety of tropes to produce a range of responses. Felli (2014: 381-4) examines international trade union discourses on climate change and identifies three essential strategies: the deliberative; collaborative growth; and the socialist. Further evidence for a range of climate discourses at work has emerged from research into ‘climate champions’, which in the UK context are employees who are given a voluntary, unpaid, but semi-official climate role by their employer. Swaffield and Bell (2012: 249-50, 258) found that these champions ‘consistently constructed the process of social change in neoliberal terms’ and ‘do not challenge the limits that neoliberalism imposes on how we can tackle the problem of climate change’. However participants also used a different set of discourses when asked about their own reasons for involvement in the scheme, appealing to ideas of justice, responsibility to future generations and ‘doing the right thing’. Lewis and Juravle (2010: 490-1) found three distinct discourses articulated by climate champions: the neoliberal view that free markets can solve environmental problems; advocacy of some kind of government intervention; and a ‘dissenter’ view. A dissenter argued that ‘the interests of capital, land (environment) and labour are not the same – they are constantly in conflict’. The idea that everyone to sit down and thrash it out amongst friends is ‘flawed... typically labour and more
recently the environment, will always tend to be on the losing side’. The three-fold division between market, state and dissenter discourses is similar to the one utilised in this paper.

**Aims and methods**

The central question in this research is whether workers organised in trade unions have the interest and capacity to tackle dangerous climate change, and specifically, whether unionised workers can become strategic climate actors. Further I ask to what extent trade unions are captive of neoliberalism in the realm of climate politics? McIlroy (2009: 195) argued that the majority of British trade union leaders had adapted to neoliberalism under Labour governments after 1997. They were ‘prisoners and pensioners of neoliberalism, sometimes reluctant prisoners – over employment legislation – sometimes enthusiastic pensioners – over training and the funds that go with it’. Alternatively, do trade unions and their representatives merely reflect the more inclusive but ultimately mainstream ecological modernisation framing? Finally, to what extent do trade unions represent their own, independent, more class-focused approach, offering a more distinctive contribution to tackling change that goes beyond matters of justice towards a more profound conception of a low-carbon economy.

The primary research data consists of published and unpublished documents produced by trade unions on climate change. The critical analysis of those materials was chosen as the main methodology because the field has hardly been explored in the UK, and it made sense to begin with public and semi-public texts. The TUC Library collection at London Metropolitan University contains rich and previously neglected sources of documents accessible to researchers. Individual unions and the TUC made materials available from their own collections. Documents include: trade union and TUC Congress resolutions; magazines, pamphlets, guides and campaign materials; contributions to government consultations; climate conference speeches and notes; internal position papers; press releases; minutes of union, TUC and TUSDAC meetings; and newspaper cuttings reporting union views and actions. The critical interrogation of union blogs supplements this method of research.

There are both strengths and limitations of these research methods. Documents alone do not capture many of the perceptions and attitudes of organisations or social agents. Data derived
from official sources may be inadequate to some extent. They may be subject to bias or distortion, or bureaucracies’ practical concerns may mean that data are not formulated in accordance with scholars’ interests. However rather than viewing official documents as more or less biased sources of data, they ‘should be treated as social products: they must be examined, not relied on uncritically as a research resource’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 130-3). The paper takes a critical stance towards trade union efforts to engage with climate change throughout.

**Findings**

**Neoliberalism**

As expected, the investigation revealed that some trade union framing of climate change are articulated in neoliberal terms. The accommodation was clearest with respect to market instruments such as EU ETS. The renewed priority given to climate change during the third term of the Labour government convinced many union officials to back EU ETS and use it for both environmental and industrial objectives. The TUC’s assessment of Phase II recognised ‘the central importance of the ETS in reaching the UK’s Kyoto-plus commitments’ and that the scheme was ‘seen to be an effective market mechanism for participating member states’. It argued that development and offsetting projects should be subject to rigorous standards and ‘independent evidence of employee engagement’ (TUSDAC 2005: 1-3).

The high-level TUC view is pragmatic: EU ETS was better than no action by government and employers on climate change. They therefore sought to push through the market mechanism to win some bargaining gains. EU ETS was ‘the most significant attempt by any nation, or set of nations, to impose an effective limit on greenhouse gas emissions’ and ‘by a long stretch the government’s most effective market-based initiative to deliver cuts in carbon emissions through carbon pricing’. The TUC supported ‘the auctioning of a higher percentage of allowances, particularly for the power generation sector, to avoid distortion of the carbon price’ (TUSDAC 2007: 1-2).
The TUC’s assessment of Phase III stated that EU ETS was ‘central to our shift to a low-carbon future’. It claimed that the success of the scheme was ‘vital in securing a stable long-term policy framework, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and securing quality jobs and investment’. However based on experience to date, TUC officials were concerned about ‘the effectiveness of this approach and about the scope for market manipulation’. It urged the government to create ‘a joint ETS policy-making forum with industry and trade unions to secure the scheme’s huge potential environmental, economic and social benefits’, an observatory to monitor and report on the industrial and employment impacts of the EU ETS in carbon-sensitive industries, and for auction revenues to establish a just transition fund supporting the rapid shift to low-carbon economic growth (TUC 2008d: 1-2, 9, 13).

TUC officials continued to support EU ETS during the coalition government, proposing a series of measures to help sustain a meaningful market price for carbon while meeting other goals. The TUC supported the principle of a carbon tax to create a carbon price floor (TUC 2011: 73). It argued that the billions of pounds of revenue from auctioning ETS permits and from the carbon price floor tax should be hypothecated to tackle issues such as fuel poverty (Pearson 2012a). The TUC and a number of unions along with 140 other major organisations supported the Energy Bill Revolution campaign, which aimed to persuade government to invest the new carbon taxes in home insulation, leading to a ‘win-win’ boost to the economy of lower emissions, more jobs and lower energy bills (TUC 2013: 23). It pointed to the French, Estonian, and Australian governments, which were recycling some on their carbon revenues back to consumers through insulation measures and in Australia, compensatory welfare benefit increases (Pearson 2013a).

Even where high-level TUC climate policy remains largely within the dominant framing of neoliberalism, there have been elements of class politics present, though sometimes expressed in sectional terms. TUC policy had a strong occupational and employment strand from the beginning. This was reflected even in the least climate-conscious positions taken on energy intensive industries and on aviation. Second, even where it supported government climate policy, there were efforts to extend it to address workers’ concerns, to widen worker representation and to open new fields of collective bargaining. This was evident with the Climate Change Levy, EU ETS and the Carbon Reduction Commitment. Neoliberalism is not the
dominant frame in trade union discussion of climate politics; in many respects trade unionists at all levels remain hostile to neoliberal climate political economy.

**Ecological modernisation**

The election of the Labour government gave a significant spur to trade union framing of its climate policy in ecological modernisation terms. In December 1997 after the Kyoto agreement, prime minister Tony Blair called business and trade unions leaders to a green summit and asked them to help combat the threat of climate change. One of the fruits of this insider status was the formation of the Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (TUSDAC) on 6 July 1998. Its terms of reference included ‘to provide a trade union perspective on the employment consequences of climate change, and the response to it’ (TUC 1998: 153-4). TUSDAC was precisely the kind of government-stakeholder vehicle propagated by ecological modernisation thinkers.

Perhaps the best illustration of the TUC’s ecological modernisation approach was its support for the Labour government’s third term climate policies. Unions welcomed the Climate Change Bill when it was first read in parliament (TUC 2007b). Trade union leaders endorsed the Bill, calling on the government ‘to provide stakeholder representation on the Committee on Climate Change, or set up a similar tripartite body’ and lobbied for a distinct trade union role and employee engagement (TUC 2008a: 75). Union officials and representatives (particularly from Unison public services union) worked with NGOs to lobby MPs, adding their weight to demands for a higher long-term target to curb emissions.

Another illustration of the ecological modernisation framing of its climate policy was union support for state intervention to shape the low-carbon economy. The TUC called for the government ‘to develop a green industrial strategy, embracing the employment, training and research aspects of a new energy policy’ (TUC 2006: 78). Union leaders welcomed the Labour government’s low-carbon industrial strategy, published in July 2009, arguing that ‘in order to make progress during the economic slowdown, an active industrialism approach was necessary, including government intervention around regulation, procurement and funding mechanisms’ (TUC 2009a: 72-3). A further example of the proximity of high level trade union framing of
climate politics in ecological modernisation terms is the prominence of social partnership. Evidence for a commitment to partnership can be found in international trade union documents, TUC materials (sometimes co-authored with government departments and employers’ organisations) as well as in the testimonies of workplace trade union representatives (BERR 2009). Some believe that climate change requires less adversarial forms of trade union action, together with cooperation with managers on ‘win-win’ objectives that contribute to reducing workplace carbon emissions will leaving other power relations intact.

TUC leaders initially took the coalition government’s climate promises in good faith, perceiving elements of continuity with the ecological modernisation approach of the previous Labour government. They offered partnership on climate change – even to a government that was making swinging austerity cuts – based around the discourse of the green economy, green growth and green jobs. The TUC’s Alliances for Green Growth conference on 11 October 2010, addressed by the new climate minister Chris Huhne, was dominated by proposals for alliances between unions, employers and the government in the energy intensive industries, green industries, over green skills and a new global climate treaty.

Disappointment set in within the first year of the new government, with early signs of a lurch by the coalition towards the more neoliberal pole of climate politics. Within the first year of the coalition government, union leaders were critical of the impact of austerity on climate matters. In fact TUC leaders identified a strategic retreat early in the coalition’s term. Officials seized on a speech in which chancellor George Osborne blamed environmental regulations for piling costs on the energy bills of households and companies. Overall, the union verdict on the coalition government’s climate credentials was scathing. Jacque Hatfield (Community) told the TUC Congress that the coalition’s claims to be the greenest government ever was ‘fast becoming the biggest sham ever’ (TUC 2011b: 38). For unions, it became clear very quickly that blue and yellow had not produced green. Instead, coalition climate policy resembled a rather putrid mélange.

The concept of just transition is the most distinctive trade union framing of climate change politics to date and is usually expressed in ecological modernisation terms in trade union literature. Just transition was first articulated in international climate circles at the Kyoto
conference in 1997. Global unions told the gathering that in response to measures to tackle greenhouse gas emissions, ‘workers will demand an equitable distribution of costs through “just transition” policies that include measures for equitable recovery of the economic and social costs of climate change programmes’. Companies, which had profited from unsustainable practices ‘must assume their share of responsibility, but any mechanism to insure this must be carefully structured to avoid further adverse employment effects’. International union officials warned that trade union support for targets that affect the workplace and community ‘will be contingent on the existence of “just transition” measures that provide, as a minimum: income protection, redundancy procedures, re-employment, and education and retraining’ (ICFTU 1997: 1, 5-6).

International union officials declared just transition to be ‘the’ approach to tackling climate change. The gathering committed unions to ‘promoting an integrated approach to sustainable development through a just transition’, including social progress, environmental protection and economic needs, democratic governance, respect for labour and other human rights and gender equality (Rosemberg 2010: 141-42). The process of elaborating the concept of just transition in some detail was enhanced by a TUC pamphlet, A Green and Fair Future: For a Just Transition to a Low Carbon Economy. It defined just transition as ‘a way that workers can support the environmental clean-up without the worry of job loss... Just transition forces employers to take responsibility for workers and keep communities intact’. The pamphlet sought to ‘assess the impact that moving towards a less carbon-intensive economy will have on jobs, skills and employment opportunities, and will explore how the transition itself can be rendered socially just’. Just transition should ‘embody principles of equality, social justice and workforce participation’. It was intended to be a ‘truly visionary’ intervention, designed to ensure that ‘all the conditions exist for a genuinely just transition to a low carbon economy’ (TUC 2008c: 14, 1).

Just transition was also acknowledged at national level. Climate minister Ed Miliband told the TUC Congress that ‘it will not just be the TUC position that we need a just transition, but it will be this Labour government’s position that we argue for at the Copenhagen Summit this December’ (TUC 2009b: 124). In the UK context, TUC officials argued that the Forum for a Just Transition, the joint unions-business-government body announced in 2009, brought together
the key elements of just transition (TUC 2010a). It was ‘both a table, and a place at the table itself’ (Pearson 2009a). Just transition was defined in terms of formal consultation with unions, green and decent jobs, education and training, diversification, social protection measures and respect for human rights (TUC 2009a). It is clear that trade unions (or at least a number of their leading figures and officials) see themselves as swords of climate justice.

However three elements of just transition are undertheorised. First, the lack of clarity on the destination of a low-carbon economy – or rather the goal of climate politics; second, whether the strategy and transitional measures are sufficient to affect such a significant transformation; and third, what just transition implies for the alliances forged by unions with other actors.

**Class**

The class dimension of climate politics partly turns on how far unions have challenged the dominant social relations of production, or through strategic interventions helped tip the balance of forces between labour and capital in workers’ favour. Challenging the distributional effects of climate policy is a tentative first step towards making such an approach and there is some evidence of it in union texts. Unions also took up distributional issues arising out of climate policy under Labour. On taxation, a ToUCHstone pamphlet on just transition argued that indirect environmental taxation was regressive and required ‘a progressive direct tax system running alongside it to ensure that the poorest do not contribute disproportionately to public funds’ (TUC 2008c: 13). Similarly, unions took up the question of fuel poverty and the related matter of energy prices. Congress resolved ‘to help those facing most difficulty from the downturn – particularly the growing numbers facing fuel poverty, including pensioners, and those suffering from the difficulties in the housing market and construction sectors’ (TUC 2008b: 34).

Another challenge to the dominant climate framings, with stronger class connotations, were interventions aiming at the public ownership of industries and natural resources. There were consistent calls for integrated publicly-owned transport, notably of the railways and occasionally buses and aviation. Successive Congress resolutions tied together industrial arguments for public ownership and control with driving down carbon emissions (TUC 2007a:
14; ibid 2008b: 22). Demands for public ownership were less prominent with regard to the energy sector, but they have been articulated – usually in response to the imminent collapse of firms or sectors. Trade unionists fused the climate crisis with the demands of the economic downturn, demanding one million climate jobs guaranteed by the state to solve both problems simultaneously (Neale 2010).

Another, more independent and class-focused element of union climate politics during this period was the increasing importance of mobilising union members for protests going beyond existing government and international climate policy (or at least to push it further and faster). Pearson (2009b) reported that international trade unionists joined the mobilisations outside the Copenhagen talks in 2009. He described how 100,000 people marched six kilometres to the UN conference, ‘arriving in darkness beneath the metro flyover, with a huge inflatable Greenpeace snowman hauled sideways to get under the bridge’. A massive green banner with the words ‘Unions have solutions: Just transition’ was spread across the width of the march and held by the Belgian unions in green builders’ hats with stickers that said, ‘Union solidarity: Just transition’. In Copenhagen, unions organised a three-day series of workshops at the World of Work Pavilion, hosted by the LO Denmark union confederation.

The trade union presence in Copenhagen and at other COPs, where links were forged between high-level representatives of unions both North and South, had positive elements of transformatory solidarity. Trade union involvement in international climate mobilisations continued, despite the vicissitudes of the COP gatherings. At the Durban climate conference in December 2011, some 20,000 people marched for climate justice and green jobs, led by the South African labour movement, while the following day 500 delegates attended a one million climate jobs conference (Pearson 2011). At Rio+20, trade unionists joined some 50,000 people marching to demand government action on the environment and climate change (ITUC 2012). At the Doha climate talks the next year, 40 union delegates joined a march there under the (forbidden) ITUC banner: “No world cup in Qatar without labour rights” – the first opposition demonstration to take place in the state (Pearson 2012b). And at the Warsaw climate conference in 2013, unions joined NGOs in an organised walk-out, arguing that pledges to cut carbon emissions, were slipping away, union did not have ‘a place at the table’ and staying in would have given ‘a false legitimacy to failing states’ (Pearson 2013b). Perhaps most
impressively, a range of unions joined the 300,000-strong climate demonstration in New York on 21 September 2014, with mobilisation across the globe in solidarity – including some 40,000 marching in London the same day for ‘system change, not climate change’ (Pearson 2014).

In the UK, unions joined climate mobilisations, bringing their members, banners and slogans. The TUC decided for the first time to support the national climate march on 3 November 2006, organised by NGOs such as the Campaign against Climate Change. It continued to publicly support demonstrations during COP meetings, culminating in The Wave demonstrations in London and Glasgow on 5 December 2009, which attracted 50,000 people. Between 2007 and 2009 three ‘green camps’ were run at Tolpuddle, which drew dozens of trade union environment reps for debate and training (SWTUC 2011: 14). The most ambitious initiative was the Jobs, Climate, Justice demonstration on 28 March 2009, during a G20 meeting in London. Union leaders made the initial moves, donated to the costs of the event and took responsibility for logistics. An estimated that 35,000 people protested on the day (TUC 2009d: 1).

Perhaps the most radical form of mobilisation took place in 2009, when dozens of wind turbine manufacturing workers on the Isle of Wight occupied their factory following the announcement by their employer Vestas that the plant would close. Although the occupation lasted only 18 days, it became the focal point of climate solidarity, with hundreds of trade unionists rallying to the campaign, organising their own protests in towns and cities across the UK and receiving some support from other workers internationally. The RMT union provided workers with practical, legal and political support, ensuring that Vestas became a cause celebre in the wider labour movement. Although the plant did close, the struggle gave a glimpse of the potential for mobilisation when trade union power was fused with climate-conscious activism (Hampton forthcoming).

Trade unions also became more involved in wider climate coalitions in the UK, participating in Campaign against Climate Change trade union conferences and engaging with the Climate Alliance activist network. Union officials held meetings on climate change with NGO representatives from Greenpeace and the Tearfund. The TUC explored the idea of a ‘third sector alliance’, comprising trade unions, national voluntary organisations, local community groups and others – the closest it came to formulating a social movement conception of
climate action (Scott 2009). It also hosted meetings with prominent climate activists Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben. These interventions and mobilisations, although generally quite restrained, shifted some unions towards activity separate from government and employers, while coming closer to more militant advocates of class politics within unions themselves and to radical climate activists.

A further class-related climate politics was the mushrooming of workplace environmental representation in the first decade of the new century. Union examples surveys in 2007, 2009 and 2012 indicated much more widespread activity. For example, one survey (TUC 2009c: 1) found thousands of climate champions making a substantial contribution towards cutting carbon emissions across the UK. Several unions such as Unison, PCS, UCU and Prospect along with the TUC established climate and environment networks involving hundreds of reps, held conferences and published guidance.

Trade unions offer a number of impressive examples of carbon reduction activity promoted by their representatives. The TUC’s *Greener Deals* publication claimed that BECTU reps had saved nearly a £1,000 a year in reduced energy costs at the Princess Theatre in Torquay. At Bristol City Council, training was expected to deliver fuel savings of at least £350 every year for each diesel van covering at least 25,000 miles in a year. At HM Prison Guys Marsh, Shaftesbury, the anaerobic digestion plant reps had campaigned for saved around £1,500 a month. Worcestershire County Council introduced a remote controlled energy system at the suggestion of GMB reps, which helped reduce energy costs by at least 15% every year. The most outstanding was a project called JUPITER (Join us People in Tackling Energy Reduction) at ABInBev’s Magor brewery in South Wales, where ‘a union-led energy saving project’ had cut carbon emissions ‘by a massive 40% within two years’ (TUC 2010b: 18-9, 23, 30).

There are multifaceted class dimensions to workplace environmental representation, in terms of organisation, control and ideology. Climate action in the workplace instigated by union reps was a unique form of climate mobilisation, implicitly independent of other actors. Even less adversarial union reps tended to go beyond the parameters laid down by government and employers. The most far-reaching incursion into what would normally be considered management’s territory were agreements over environmental matters (TUC 2009c), such as
those at Bristol City Council, Western Power Distribution and South Thames College, which gave union reps partial suzerainty over environmental decisions, with at least the possibility of consultation and implicitly of veto. The most thoroughgoing agreements also allowed for time during working hours to progress climate issues, for workers in general and union reps in particular. Discussing environmental matters on joint union-management committee has similar effects, extending the union role to partially encroach on aspects of the work process – for example by taking part in audits and inspections of the workplace and then making recommendations for change. At a lower level, the use of meetings, conferences, fairs, DVD showings, ‘Question Time’ panels and other educational events during work time and on work premises also implicitly challenged the frontiers of control.

**Conclusion**

The central question in this research is whether workers organised in trade unions have the interest and capacity to tackle dangerous climate change, and specifically, whether unionised workers can become strategic climate actors. There is prime facie evidence that trade unions in the UK have begun to engage with the political complexities of climate change and indeed to offer some original and innovative paths towards carbon reduction. This is evident in a thoroughgoing focus on climate justice, in distinctive demands for radical political action, in new forms of workplace environmental representation and in forms of popular mobilisation.

However some trade unionists also articulate mainstream framings of climate change. Trade unionists approaching climate change primarily as a market issue tend to emphasise similar concerns to their employers, including the impact on competitiveness, profitability and employment. These union representatives are generally supportive of market-based instruments such as emissions trading, though they are mindful of effects on the viability of the businesses they organise in. Their climate solidarity will tend to be accommodationist towards employers, in the sense defined by labour geographers. Taking neoliberal globalisation as given and in the absence of a global compact, they are likely to fear the effects of ‘carbon leakage’ for employment.
By contrast, trade unionists orientated towards social integration often embrace the discourse of ecological modernisation, with its pursuit of co-benefits and win-wins for social partners. They tend to look to the state for an active industrial policy, one that promotes low-carbon technologies and new green jobs, especially in renewable energy. They are concerned with the wider social justice impacts of climate policy, including the effects of higher prices for fuel poverty and with adaptation to climate changes already underway. These union representatives are likely to accommodate more closely with their local states. Finally, other trade unionists take a more explicitly class-orientated approach. They are more critical of existing efforts to tackle climate change and are unwilling to entrust action solely to states and markets. In particular they underline the question of who pays and conceive of existing climate policy as taking measures at the expense of workers. These trade unionists emphasise radical alternative structures and social relations, both domestically and internationally, even when staying within the boundaries of states and capital (such as the workers’ plans). They avoid collaboration with employers and the state, but seek an independent stance based on identifiable class interests. They will probably ally with community and other organisations in coalitions and engage in more militant tactics around matters of ‘transformative’ solidarity.

This research confirms that at the highest levels, UK union climate framing was closest to ecological modernisation during this period. This was particularly clear in union support for the Labour government’s Climate Change Act, carbon capture, its ‘balanced’ energy and aviation policy, and for partnership. Union leaders wanted a more active industrial strategy focused on the development of green technologies and believed the Labour government had been won to that perspective in the last year of its administration. However the election in 2010 and the subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government put paid to trade union efforts to tie climate and economic crises together. Less prominent, but still significant union framings were located closer to employers and deployed neoliberal market arguments, in particular over EU ETS. Issues such as employment were sometimes posed in narrow, sectional terms or more blatantly in neoliberal terms close to business.

The limited nature of some union climate framing in class terms is clear from the examples cited. A class-based climate approach would have involved unions retaining a high degree of political, ideological and organisational independence from both employers and the state.
There is some evidence of this in union fiscal policy, public ownership of rail transport and with the mobilisation of union members for climate goals (including opposition to airport expansion). However there are at least three further areas where such an approach was more pronounced. First, union conceptions of just transition and climate jobs have been more consistently class-focused; second, forms of climate representation at work have exhibited elements of working class organisation; and third, union involvement in the Vestas occupation indicated distinctive forms of working class action.

Trade unions are not prisoners of neoliberalism in the realm of climate politics, although they exhibit some accommodation to it. There are more prominent signs that union seek to become swords of climate justice, particularly to effect a just transition to a low carbon economy. More radically, a minority current within trade unionism articulates its own, distinctive, independent and class-focused climate politics. This has perhaps the greatest potential to break out of the current impasse in climate politics and chart and alternative paths for the emerging climate movement.

References


——— (2009c) Unions and Climate Change: London: LRD.
——— (2009d) ‘G20 must seize chance to “Put People First”’, press release, 1 April 2009
