

Unions Have The Potential And The Responsibility To Advance A “Just Transition”



Norman Rogers - United Steelworkers (USW) Local 675 Photo: LinkedIn

The idea of a “just transition” has emerged as an absolute requirement for any progress toward a clean energy future. An energy transformation will impact workers in the fossil fuel industry but will also affect regions and communities differently. A just transition must be designed to ensure that the benefits of greening the economy are shared widely and that no worker is left behind.

Norman Rogers, a 20-plus-years employee of a southern California refinery and second vice president of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 675, also serves on the Joint Health and Safety Committee and Negotiating Committee at the refinery. In this interview, Rogers shares his insights on the principles and aims of a just transition and how we could get there.

C.J. Polychroniou: “Just transition” is associated with the environmental transition, in sectors such as chemicals and energy, although it is now moving into other areas such as health care and even development. Can you talk, from your experience as a refinery worker and labor organizer, about what the notion of just transition entails and how it is being used in connection with workers in the fossil fuel industry?

Norman Rogers: The term “just transition” is very much linked with the labor movement. Tony Mazzocchi, a trade unionist with the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers union (OCAW), coined the term as it related to the dangerous, toxic, life-threatening chemicals to which his members were exposed. The idea then, as it is now, is to find other ways to meet the needs for the products being made and the health and welfare of the workforce he represented.

Today, the move to renewables, the increase in the use of electric vehicles and even steel being made without the petroleum coke (petcoke) from the refining process is set to have a profound impact on the number of fossil fuel industry jobs. Knowing what the future holds and the serious repercussions set to take place, and planning for that outcome, that is what the call for a just transition is all about.

As a labor organizer representing fossil fuel workers in the current atmosphere, the philosophy behind a just transition is ensuring that no worker is left behind when transitioning to a clean energy economy. Everyone must be accounted for, whether they are toward the end of their career, just starting out, or any point in between. This fight must be won if the transition to a sustainable future is to be realized. To the extent that we do not do this, we will not be successful in building the community of allies needed for the task at hand.

It's been said that a just transition is absolutely essential for effective climate action. Why is this so, and what role can trade unions play in facing the challenges of global warming?

A just transition is essential because, at the end of the day, the decisions to be made to address climate concerns are ultimately going to take place in the ballot booth, and to the extent people see their jobs going away, without alternatives, their vote [will] be to maintain the status quo. There has to be a pathway for those folks set to lose their jobs to move into other careers. And this reaches beyond people working in oilfields and refineries to people building mufflers, engine blocks and transmission housings.

As we transition toward the new economy and the attention we give to it being “just,” we must ensure there is justice as well. The new jobs that come online and the allocation of resources must be made available to all; the sustainable future being touted must include all stakeholders: fossil fuel workers, fence-line

communities, Indigenous people, the underemployed — they all must be accounted for as we move forward. The benefits of a decarbonized future must be shared by all and the framework we build to make that happen is an integral part of any success we hope to achieve. A just path to a decarbonized future is absolutely critical to an ecologically sustainable economy. The costs of achieving a green economy should not be borne by those who have suffered and been excluded by the injustices associated with industrialization. I quote my father when I say, “Failing to plan is planning to fail.”

A successful transition can only be achieved through social dialogue, consultation with those most directly affected by a decarbonized future and recognition there may be more than one path forward. Unions have a key role to play given the move to a green economy so fundamentally impacts the lives of workers. Unions have the potential, the responsibility, to advance the cause of a transition that is just. They must help ensure that workers, and the communities in which they live, receive a fair deal. Organized labor has a long, rich history of fighting for an equitable future for workers; the same must hold true now as we move to a decarbonized future.

Labor unions are divided over the Green New Deal. Some trade unions support a transition away from fossil fuels, while others seem to express apprehension, anxiety and fear over the prospect of a transition to clean, renewable energy sources. However, the prevailing view seems to be that “jobs vs. the environment” is a false dichotomy, a false choice. How do you and the union you represent look at the issue of “jobs vs. the environment”?

Without a doubt, there is a great deal of division in regards to climate concerns but, to a certain extent, one’s view of climate concerns are almost a moot point given the changes taking place. If one keeps track of the number of television ads for electric cars over the course of a weekend, it becomes obvious the landscape is changing, and these are changes that mean a drop in demand for fossil-fuel-powered vehicles. Add to that, in California, new fossil-fuel-powered passenger cars will no longer be sold after 2035. It should be noted there are numerous other states making similar moves. With that, the debate over jobs vs. the environment becomes unproductive given that the focus should be how we make the jobs to come good-paying union jobs.

New work is coming and with it, a new workforce is needed. The number of jobs

associated with the clean energy economy already surpass those in the fossil fuel industry, and with the predictions these jobs are set to further increase in number, we can help bury the “jobs vs. environment” debate by ensuring these new jobs are quality jobs that support families and communities in ways that the current fossil fuel jobs have for close to a century.

From a practical standpoint, what would a just transition model actually look like?

Speaking only for myself, a just transition model must include income support for workers during the transition. Also, solid, well-financed training and re-training programs with a clear path to access the new jobs generated is necessary. With the jobs to come, strong collective bargaining must be a part of the picture. Similarly, as we start from scratch, sustainable development tools for economically disadvantaged communities must be incorporated so everyone benefits from what’s to come. The list of course should be expanded to include specific government policies aiming to integrate strong social protection measures for those at risk of losing their jobs and those unemployed workers in communities harmed by the challenges and threats of global warming.

What are the best strategies for creating enduring labor-environmental alliances?

The chief strategy I can suggest is that we need allies everywhere we can find them, and there is a language and a type of discussion that exists when we are speaking to allies. There has been a great deal of demonization that has taken place in reference to the fossil fuel industry and those who work there. An understanding is needed that those folks working these jobs are people doing the right thing; they have put roofs over their family’s heads, food on the table and supported the communities in which they live. And everyone, *everyone* has benefited from the fruits of their labors, whether it be hopping a flight for an overseas vacation or a road trip or the syringes that deliver the vaccinations to help fend off the coronavirus.

We are now being told that the right thing to do is for us to lose our jobs, jobs which in many cases have been multigenerational and, after decades of collective bargaining, have become good-paying jobs. If we can move to a place where there is recognition of these concerns, it creates a space where the discussions that need to take place about a path forward can happen. The goals of meeting climate challenges and the realities of people being able to support their families and

communities need not be the “us or them,” either/or proposition it is being made out to be. It is a chance for us to see how well we can listen and then how clever we can be with what we’ve heard.

Source:

<https://truthout.org/unions-have-the-potential-and-the-responsibility-to-advance-a-just-transition/>

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout’s* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).