

# Unite Environment Conference

Climate Crisis: A Workers' Led Future



Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2021 – 9:30am-12pm

## Conference Report

The threat to the planet because of the climate emergency means that there is an urgent need for action to radically transform our economies. Unions must influence decisions concerning the future of workers. The Unite Environment Conference: **'Climate Crisis: A Workers' Led Future'** provided a space for discussion amongst over 400 participants from Unite via Zoom, with another 1,400 joining via other social media platforms to work towards developing a unified response to the challenges and opportunities presented by the climate emergency. Speakers from both within and beyond Unite were invited to share experience and knowledge about how to achieve a workers' led future.

### Opening Address

To open, **Jim Mowatt** (*Director of Education and Convenor of the Unite Environmental Taskforce*) introduced the purpose of the Conference. He highlighted that the climate crisis is a vast problem facing workers. The Conference is a springboard within Unite to work to find solutions to the climate crisis. This is even more pressing with the upcoming COP26 in Glasgow in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

The Unite Climate Change film was shown to participants: <https://youtu.be/cEGqOZMhQGg>

### A Decisive Decade for Action

A video sent by **Ed Miliband, MP** (*Shadow Secretary for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy*) was then shown. In the video Ed emphasised his support for the conference. In summary:

*We are in a decisive moment and so we must act with urgency. Transition is not just about avoiding climate disaster. It is also about creating a fairer and healthier world. Workers and unions are central in the fight against the climate crisis. Workers must have a voice in the transition and their interests must be represented. No worker will be left behind if a Labour government is in power. We need a fair and just Green New Deal that provides investment, jobs, and equality.<sup>2</sup> We need to work together to make it happen.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://ukcop26.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.greennewdealuk.org/> <https://www.labourgnd.uk/>

Then, **Sakina Sheikh** (Member of the London Assembly and Unite activist) gave a short address to the conference. In summary:

*Spaces like the Unite Environment Conference are vital to bring people within and beyond the union together to discuss how to lead the climate transition. We are in a decisive decade for action. Never has the need for transformation been clearer than during the COVID-19 pandemic – big corporations have been making huge profits while workers face the worst impacts. We need to transition from high carbon to low carbon industries and transform the rotten economic system that has given us the climate crisis.*

*Trade unions are essential to push back on the negative economic agenda. We must ensure that future jobs are sustainable and unionised to ensure that no worker is left behind. As we come out of the pandemic, unions and workers must decide how we should rebuild the economy. It is vital that we get the message out to members. The environment conference is a continuation of Unite leadership in this conversation.*

Following the opening remarks, members of the Unite Environmental Taskforce<sup>3</sup> answered some of the questions that participants had posed. Key issues and themes included:

- **Education is vital to raise awareness of the climate crisis and the need for just transition.** Workers need the knowledge, skills, and confidence to articulate demands for a just transition. Unite Education is in the process of shaping and piloting education courses ranging from short introductory courses to 1, 3 and 5-day courses on the environment for members, including training for health and safety reps to be qualified as environmental reps.<sup>4</sup> The education department is in the process of rolling these out across Unite. There is also a webpage focused on Unite environment work, which includes educational resources.<sup>5</sup>
- **Unite Environment Taskforce has developed an Environmental Charter which outlines key demands for a just transition.**<sup>6</sup> It aims to empower reps and workers to have a voice.
- **Representatives need to integrate environmental demands at the workplace.** This includes auditing workplaces and supply chains and making demands around just transition at the bargaining table. Unite will provide tools to enable reps to take action.
- **A skills revolution is needed to facilitate transition.** This means government/local authority investment in green jobs and net-zero apprenticeships, development of a national/regional training and retraining skills agendas and skills centres (e.g. reskilling for retrofitting as central to decarbonisation – “we need to build a retrofit army”) Just transition comes down to money. Questions around ‘what is a green job?’
- **Hydrogen.** We need to invest in sustainable methods of hydrogen production.
- **COP26.** Unite is part of the trade union coalition at COP and will highlight the need for a workers’ just transition and the need for workplace change to ensure greener and healthier workplaces. A COP26 coalition website has been set up with a map of activities. A Global Day of Action will be held on 6<sup>th</sup> November.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Members of the Unite Environment Taskforce engaged in the question-and-answer sessions following on from the presentations. For a list of these speakers see end of report.

<sup>4</sup> Courses advertised soon: <https://www.unitetheunion.org/why-join/member-services/education/training-and-courses/>  
To attend short courses on environment contact: [education.education@unitetheunion.org](mailto:education.education@unitetheunion.org)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.learnwithunite.org/environment/>

<sup>6</sup> Unite Environment Charter soon available at: <https://www.learnwithunite.org/environment/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://wemaketomorrow.org> <https://cop26coalition.org/gda/>

COP26 Trade Union Model Motion: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/11g4o-7NAWCQ67q-lwySBrQkooCGIU21B90VV6UR5-pA/edit?usp=drivesdk>

## Fighting for social inclusion, justice, and equality

Then, **Caitlin Lee** (*Chair of Unite Hospitality and Services, Glasgow*) introduced the work the hospitality sector has been undertaking to achieve a just transition. In summary:

*The climate crisis means just transition is essential. But it is about more than achieving greener jobs – it also means eradicating poverty, exploitative and precarious work and poverty wages, and achieving social inclusion, justice and fairness. History shows that workers must lead and shape change otherwise inequality will increase. Workers have historically been left out of transitions. The poorest and most vulnerable groups have always been left behind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in precarious industries were exploited and many lost their jobs, while multinational corporations got richer.*

*Workers in all industries need to be empowered and engaged to have ownership over the fight. Unite Hospitality and Services Branch in Glasgow has been fighting for workers to feel autonomy to demand better for their future. Workers as a collective need to demand a just transition that is fit for all. This means addressing inequalities within the workforce. Workers in the hospitality sector are some of the lowest paid and most precarious, often classed as ‘low-skilled.’ Marginalised workers such as women, migrants and racialised groups face exploitation and discrimination. But all workers are skilled, no matter what job they do. We need to challenge the narrative of ‘low-skilled.’ All skills are useful and transferrable.*

*Hospitality workers are looking to make COP26 a lightning rod for campaigning for just transition for hospitality workers – to shine a spotlight on problems and hold companies to account. They are already standing up against some of the biggest hospitality companies and are winning better treatment, showing that workers in strength can change industries. The sector has a Hospitality Charter<sup>8</sup> that aims to address exploitative practices in the industry. Trade unions and community groups in Glasgow are also using this as an opportunity to demand better long-term changes for the city.*

*Unite Hospitality and Services Glasgow branch are holding an event at COP26 to demand better for members in the hospitality industry, and to show that the industry is not fit for a new just world.<sup>9</sup>*

Following the presentation, a short discussion was held. Key issues and themes included:

- **Language is important.** Workers need ownership over the narrative of ‘transition.’ Workers need to be the ones to define what is ‘just.’
- **Workers need to engage across sectors.** We need to make this a collective struggle, share best practice, and find solutions together. All sectors and industries are important in this fight.
- **Climate change is a class issue.** The climate crisis impacts every person as a worker and a citizen. Transition will be disruptive and will hugely impact livelihoods. But it won’t be as disruptive as the impacts of climate change. Unions and workers are best placed to identify a plan for transition across different sectors. The failure of past transitions show that transition is a class issue. The fight for clean air is a real example of how the climate crisis is a class issue.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unitehospitality.org/>

<sup>9</sup> To keep up to date with the branch activities. Follow on Facebook @ Unite Hospitality and Twitter @GlasgowUnite

## **A Public Goods Approach**

**Sean Sweeney** (*Trade Unions for Energy Democracy [TUED]*)<sup>10</sup> then introduced the global perspective and explored the challenges that workers face. In summary:

*The transition to a low-carbon global economy is not inevitable. The dominant view among unions globally is that transition is inevitable and that the union's job is to get a seat at the table. But TUED and partner unions find that globally the transition has not started.*<sup>11</sup>

*We are facing a climate emergency because of years of failed neoliberal pro-market policies that have not effectively addressed the problem. Since the UN started talking about climate change in the 1990s, the level of ambition amongst leaders has increased, but actions are completely contrary to messages and emissions have actually risen.*

*Workers need to lead the transition and build an alternative model for working class people, but we can't have a just transition unless we take control over key economic sectors. We need a radical policy shift towards a public pathway approach based on a global public goods agenda, particularly in the energy sector. We can't effectively decarbonise the global economy within the capitalist framework and through private investment. The term 'just transition' is currently being used to facilitate further privatisation of public services.*

*Unions need to build a unified strategy to reclaim the transition. The voices of all workers in all sectors are legitimate in the climate debate. We all live under one atmosphere and "we are all energy unions now." This means that all workers should have a say in the transition to a low-carbon future. COP26 is vital to build these alliances and is also an important space to fight for reclaiming energy to public ownership. This has been achieved in Mexico.<sup>12</sup> This shows what we can do if the union movement works together. Globally all workers need to Unite around this. Unions in the Global South need to have a voice in the fight.*<sup>13</sup>

## **A workers' transition in the CPPT sector**

**Tony Devlin** (*National Officer for CPPT and Downstream Oil*) then introduced the work of the CPPT sector around decarbonisation. In summary:

*The CPPT sector is hugely diverse – covering around 55,000 workers in 3,000 workplaces. It is also very energy intensive - of the eight industrial sectors that emit two thirds of industrial carbon emissions, four are in CPPT – ceramics, chemicals, glass, and oil refining. Research suggests there has been little progress towards just transition in most subsectors, despite rapid changes in the direction of many companies e.g. oil companies are now rebranding themselves as 'energy' companies, which amounts to little more than greenwashing. Capitalism is currently winning over green investment for public ownership. The sector realised it needed to develop a unified just transition strategy. But questions remain about what just transition means, where the jobs are that we are transitioning to, and what that means for members in the sector.*

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<sup>10</sup> <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org>

<sup>11</sup> For more information see: <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/resources/tued-publications/tued-working-paper-11-trade-unions-and-just-transition/>

<sup>12</sup> Mexico recently elected a new government that fights for energy self-determination and ending privatisation.

<sup>13</sup> During the start of the pandemic, TUED convened a Global Trade Union Forum to bring unions together:

<http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/tued-bulletin-102/>

In June an International Trade Union Forum on Ecological and Social Transition was convened:

<https://forumsyndeco.org/en>

*The CPPT sector has opted for the term ‘workers’ transition’, rather than ‘just transition’ to emphasise that workers’ voices must be heard to deliver a just transition to a green economy. Workers will be the ones to decide what a green economy should be and what a worker’s transition should look like. We need to remember our strength as a collective of workers in bargaining and using our expertise to challenge our employers.*

*Education is vital to inform and engage members, workers, and other key stakeholders in developing union strategy around the issues of decarbonisation and just transition. The sector has established a half-day training before each NISC meeting to strengthen sectoral strategy. What employers fear most, is a worker with knowledge.*

Tony then introduced the demands set out in the **‘A Green Economy: CPPT – A Workers’ Transition’** paper. The demands aim to secure a workers’ transition towards a decarbonised economy in the sector. The demands are:

1. A **government led industrial strategy for the CPPT sector** where jobs and communities are protected and supported by **public investment and ownership**, including a **transition commission** where workers’ voice is represented.
2. A dedicated, fully funded **department of government** whose sole focus is on a **green economy and a Just Transition** in, and for, the UK.
3. **Trade Union engagement and involvement** at national, regional and sectoral level to support industrial strategies to deliver a just transition for workers.
4. **Public policy and investment** to secure a positive future for workers in affected industries and communities with targeted economic investment in industry cluster areas.
5. **Identification and strategic planning to support green jobs** that workers in affected industries will transition into.
6. A **skills transition policy** with job and income protection for workers while developing any new and necessary skills.
7. **Supportive industrial relations landscape** with access to workplaces for trade unions supporting fair work and good quality jobs.



Key themes and topics from the discussions that followed the presentations included:

- **After the pandemic, we need to rebuild our economies with public ownership and an alternative to the neo-liberal agenda at the heart.** The pandemic emphasises the need for action to transform our economies. Decarbonisation of the energy system is not possible without public ownership. We need to take on the capitalist drive for endless growth and commit to energy as a public good. Increased privatisation has shown increasing dividends for shareholders at expense of workers and the climate.
- **‘Nothing about us without us.’** Just transition should be *a principle, a process, and a practice*. We need to provide structures for workers to have a voice in the workplace and the wider community, including in all consultations and engagements around the climate crisis.
- **We need a global solidarity approach to transition.** Trade unions from the Global North and Global South need to work together to achieve a just transition. COP is an opportunity to do this. International combines can help to strengthen coordination across global value chains. Solutions must not further disadvantage the already exploited Global South.
- **Workers need to lead the development of plans for alternative production.** We need democracy at the workplace and to build a new workers’ control movement that workers, with



representation for marginalised groups, can engage in. We can draw inspiration from The Lucas Plan developed by workers at Lucas Aerospace.<sup>14</sup>

- **There are a small number of cases where ‘just transitions’ appear to be occurring for workers and communities impacted by decarbonisation efforts** (e.g. coal miners in Germany and Spain, and public investment and ownership of offshore wind in Norway, Sweden and Germany). These examples can inform our own strategies in the UK.
- **We need to build alliances within Unite and beyond to build collective solutions.** This includes other unions. We also need to ensure that community branches are involved.
- **Just transition means the need to develop new technologies, techniques and approaches.** This is an opportunity for workers. This includes district heating schemes, mass retrofit programmes (with a retrofit army to insulate buildings<sup>15</sup>), investment in sustainable hydrogen, renewable energy, electric vehicles, battery recycling, and encouraging the use of public transport, and walk/cycle to work/school. The Greener Jobs Alliance<sup>16</sup> have released a paper that outlines a legal framework for climate and just transition at work.<sup>17</sup>

### We cannot defend the indefensible

**Sue Longley** (General Secretary, International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations [IUF])<sup>18</sup> then gave a presentation. In summary:

*IUF sectors are heavily affected by the climate change. They are also drivers of climate change. Workers across the IUF are experiencing greenwashing within the companies they work for. Companies and industries are undertaking activities under the pretence of saving the planet, but it is actually about cost cutting. This has consequences for workers, including increasingly precarious and outsourced work and unstable employment relations.<sup>19</sup> Education is vital to identify fake claims and challenge them. It is essential for unions to build knowledge and capacity in workplaces. The IUF is currently working on a guide on the climate crisis and intensive livestock production.*



*The global food system is broken and is responsible for huge amounts of damage to the environment<sup>20</sup>, but it is the biggest single employer globally and is home to some of the most dangerous and precarious work. In many parts of the industry, workers are denied fundamental rights to organise and bargain, child labour is rampant, and the industry is highly dependent on the exploitation of vulnerable workers, including migrant labour. The model is broken, and we need transformation.*

*Women face disproportionate impacts from climate change. For example, women banana workers are frequently laid off when plantations are devastated by storms, and tea pickers (most of whom are women) are already losing income because of drops in yield. We need to gender proof our responses and bring more women into leadership positions in the union. The union movement is also an ageing movement. Tackling the climate crisis is an opportunity to bring*

<sup>14</sup> [thelucasaerocombineshopstewardscommittee.org](http://thelucasaerocombineshopstewardscommittee.org) [theplandocumentary.com](http://theplandocumentary.com)

Workers from Lucas plan made a film that tells their story: <https://vimeo.com/305253552>

<sup>15</sup> See ‘Insulate Britain’ campaign: <https://www.insulatebritain.com>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Outline-Legal-Framework-Final.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.iuf.org>

<sup>19</sup> <https://unitehere.org/campaign/hotel-rooms-should-be-cleaned-every-day/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/MeatAtlas2021\\_final\\_web.pdf?dimension1=ecology](https://eu.boell.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/MeatAtlas2021_final_web.pdf?dimension1=ecology)

*young workers into the movement. Young people are also facing increasing levels of anxiety and mental stress because of the climate crisis.<sup>21</sup>*

*We cannot defend the indefensible. We must accept that industries do have to change. We need to organise in those sectors to improve power and voice at the workplace. We need to work with affiliates around production transfer. This is also an opportunity to mobilise across borders.*

Following the presentation, a final discussion was held. There were many comments and questions that went unanswered on the day, which have been subsequently integrated into the points included below. Key issues and themes included:

- **Women need a voice to articulate their own demands around transition.** Women need a structural platform/safe space to engage women more actively. We need to recognise women's unwaged work, and the feminisation of poverty and lack of political power that women have. The Women's Budget Group have made suggestions of how green jobs could be created in support/social care sector.<sup>22</sup> We need to adopt an equalities perspective to understand how groups in situations of vulnerability will be affected disproportionately by climate change. It was noted that there will be a focus on climate crisis at the 2021 women's week.<sup>23</sup>
- **Greenwashing by businesses is a major problem across industries.** Sustainability measures introduced by companies often actually lead to loss of jobs and reduction in working hours. We need to raise consciousness and ensure we do not turn a blind eye to these practices.
- **We need to transform the industrialised agriculture and meat processing sectors.** This should be central to the debate at COP26.
- **"Turkeys voting for Christmas."** There is tension between representing the interests of members and workers whilst also balancing environmental considerations and the need for transition.
- **What are alternative energy sources?** *Nuclear* - complexities around the dangers associated with nuclear/footprint of the nuclear fuel chain vs. the need to get as much power as possible. *Hydrogen* – only if it is sustainable hydrogen. *Electrification?* Reuse of batteries to provide storage and need for development of more battery recycling. *Renewables* - we need public investment in renewables and stop jobs in renewables being outsourced to other countries.
- **Unions and workers need a political voice to influence government policy and pressure government to fulfil commitments.** Unite also needs a structured policy on major areas of the economy that the government should be investing in with costs and timescales.<sup>24</sup> Questions around 'where is the labour leadership on a green new deal?'
- **There are tensions around airport expansion and jobs versus environment.** Unite policy is to support aviation, which is addressing climate change, and through pressure via membership along with other groups on Sustainable Aviation's Advisory Board have a commitment to bring aviation emissions down to zero.
- **The need for public transport that works for the working class.** This is essential to reduce emissions but also to allow people to access work and opportunities. We need renationalisation of the public transport network.
- **Unions need to recruit more young people.** But this can only be done if unions take the climate crisis seriously. 'Unite in Schools' often focuses on the climate crisis at the request of the students. It is crucial for unions to engage in the school strikes to engage young activists.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-58549373>

<sup>22</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Feminist-Green-New-Deal.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.unitetheunion.org/media/3418/equalites-education-programme-2021.pdf> or contact: [lynette.lowe@unitetheunion.org](mailto:lynette.lowe@unitetheunion.org)

<sup>24</sup> Unite responses to government consultations can be found at: <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/unite-responses-to-consultations>

- **We need to fight for legislation to force employers to the collective bargaining table.** This includes more regulation on corporations, and legal frameworks that gives statutory backing for union engagement around transition planning. We also need to challenge local authorities/councils' investment in pension funds and build ties with local authorities to ensure sustainability in public procurement and supply chains.
- **The impact of Brexit and changing trade deals on the climate crisis.**
- **Just transition must be fostered through Unite structures.** Unite needs to use regional offices to achieve worker-led planning for green jobs locally. Questions around Unite's plan to reduce its own carbon footprint.<sup>25</sup>

**Jim Mowatt** then highlighted that this conference was a springboard to progress in workplaces and within Unite. This issue must be taken to the Policy Conference. Unite is providing resources for activities and Sharon Graham, Unite General Secretary is supportive of this work. Jim closed the meeting by asking everyone to do more in the future.

The recording of the conference can be found here: <https://fb.watch/8c0e7xuFVv/>

Alongside the guest speakers, members of the Unite Environmental Taskforce contributed to the environment conference, including in the question-and-answer sessions. This included:

**Barry Faulkner** (*National Political Education Coordinator*)

**Carl Jerromes** (*Tutor/Researcher Education*)

**Colin Potter** (*Researcher*)

**Jackson Cullinane** (*Regional Coordinating Officer Scotland*)

**Joan Francis** (*PA to Director of Education*)

**Lynette Lowe** (*National Education Administrator*)

**Siobhan Endean** (*National Officer Education, Community Youth Workers and Not for Profit, & Equalities*)

**Stephen Craig** (*National Development Officer*)

This summary report was compiled by **Georgia Montague-Nelson, GLI**

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<sup>25</sup> Additional shared resources in the chat included:

London Mining Network Report on Transition: [https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/A%20Material%20Transition\\_report\\_War%20on%20Want.pdf](https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/A%20Material%20Transition_report_War%20on%20Want.pdf)

Water Activism in El Salvador: <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/el-salvador-water-activism/>

Fuel Poverty Action: <https://www.fuelpovertyaction.org.uk>

Model Motion Fuel Poverty Action: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bjf06AFnyoKn3MDy-lbKtp5cjZ-VLL-O/edit?usp=sharing&oid=113551431671154327158&rtpof=true&sd=true>