

TUC Special 2024 - First Edition

Actions have consequences

One of the ironies of this year's intense wildfire season globally has been the sight of Danielle Smith, the Premier of Alberta in Canada, crying while she announced the devastation of the popular resort of Jasper, the impact of which can be [viewed here](#).

A third of the town's buildings were destroyed by what the **BBC described** as "a wall of fire 100m high", which "melted cars to the road and turned homes to ash." 25,000 people had to be evacuated. As Smith said, "The feelings of loss and fear and loneliness must be overwhelming."

Smith's tears were ironic because just a year earlier she had taken action in defence of Alberta's Fossil Fuel Industry by signing a Province wide moratorium on green energy investment, with the result that since then "**new deals for renewable energy dropped from more than 1000 Megawatts (MW) in 2023 to just 50 MW so far this year**", making wildfires of the sort that devastated Jasper and have been seen across the world this year more likely, more frequent, more intense.

Actions have consequences, and so do votes.

The GJA produces a monthly newsletter available on our website.

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TUC Motions: On the Right or Wrong side of Science, and therefore History?

The TUC this year has the chance to vote for two motions that unambiguously put our movement on the right side of history, and science. They also advocate a more secure long term future for workers. **Motion 17 from UNISON Climate Emergency, the next steps** notes that

- *“the climate emergency will affect all jobs and all workers adversely” (our emphasis)*
- **with a call on the UK government to “address this emergency as it would any other, with a rapid transition away from fossil fuels to prevent catastrophic climate breakdown.”**
- with proposals for the *“General Council to campaign for:*
 - i. *negotiated transition plans that guarantee protection for all workers in all sectors of the economy including equality strands to cover jobs, wages, pensions, training and skills, and trade union rights*
 - ii. *statutory just transition commissions for each nation to advise and direct on just transition plans that will protect workers and transform to a green economy*
 - iii. *public ownership of key sectors such as energy, water, transport, mail, broadband, education, health, and social care*
 - iv. *a national climate service to plan, coordinate and fund education and training for the workforce and a wide scale transformation to a decarbonised economy*
 - v. *unions to co-operate in negotiating industrial strategies for decarbonisation*
 - vi. *mandatory environmental impact assessments on all proposals and decisions*
 - vii. *a year of green trade union activity linked to climate justice groups to promote the importance of this*

Summary

Along with the PCS Motion below, this is an agenda for

- A year of union action on Just Transition and climate change, providing a campaigning focus for all that this entails, because, if the TUC adopts this position, it will be ahead of the government and leading it in the imperative direction.
- A Just Transition campaign by the whole movement, with unions working together within and across sectors on common demands alongside cutting edge demands on government to take control of the energy sector,
- Set up Just Transition bodies in each part of the UK,
- Complementing a National Climate Service in Whitehall to pull government together in this common emergency mission.

The amendment from the UCU noting *“the dire environmental consequences of war”* and adding a demand for *“the government to seek to taper defence spending and arms proliferation, with a just transition into climate jobs for affected workers”* is a useful addition, as investing in war instead of a Just Transition is pushing the hands of the **doomsday clock** towards midnight with both hands.



The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists founded in 1945 by Einstein, Oppenheimer, and the scientists who helped develop the first atomic weapons, created the Doomsday Clock two years later, using the imagery of the countdown to midnight to convey threats to humanity and the planet. It is now set at 90 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been, during the hottest years on record; and getting hotter.

Motion 18 Climate Change from PCS takes this further, spelling out that the

- *“International Energy Agency (IEA) states that to stay below the Paris Climate Agreement of 1.5°C, we must reduce fossil fuel use by 25 per cent this decade and not develop any new fossil fuel sites”*
- *and that “the working class in the UK and globally are already being impacted by the consequences of climate change”,*
- *with a fuller agenda for “the building of combines within and across sectors, at the level of branches as well as nationally and globally, to develop common industrial strategies that contribute to a ‘whole economy’ approach to decarbonisation, including engagement with, and community and climate justice groups”*
- *and for the “national climate service to plan, coordinate and fund education and training for the workforce and a wide scale transformation to a decarbonised economy and engagement with community and climate justice groups”.*

These two motions are the necessary core of a position that allows the trade union movement to anticipate events that will damage our members and the whole of society, and envisages the sort of changes we need to get a grip on them, allowing us to help lead the escape in line with the science. This would be the trade union movement leading the whole of society.



A wrecking amendment from the GMB

The Amendment from the GMB would wreck all that if passed.

It starts with the assertion that *“the UK is decarbonising faster than any other G20 country since 2000”* which is designed to induce a sense of *“oh, that’s alright then”*; and is the sort of soundbite we used to get from Rishi Sunak when he was arguing for a slower pace of decarbonisation.

But, if you are in a race for your life, it doesn’t matter if you are ahead of the pack when everyone is running too slowly to get to safety in time. And that’s exactly the situation we are in.

Not only is the UK falling behind its own Paris targets, so is the whole G20. In fact, with decarbonisation languishing at **0.2% in 2021**, the pace of change needs to accelerate to eleven times that rate to meet Paris targets.

There is no point in congratulating yourself for leading a pack that is going so slowly. What we need to do is to accelerate, and encourage and help the others to do the same; on the principle of international solidarity that should be core to the trade union movement.

To assert - as this amendment does - that the transition should be *“to a more diverse energy mix”*; and not *“away from fossil fuels”* is a straight contradiction to the **scientific imperative laid down by the IPCC** that *“The world must rapidly shift away from burning fossil fuels — the number one cause of the climate crisis”* As gas is a fossil fuel, its continued use will have to be in ever more residual quantities.

Precisely because, as GMB points out, *“energy sectors like gas employ many thousands in well paid unionised jobs”*, unions have to urgently take a lead in a wholesale Just Transition as envisaged in the UNISON and PCS motions; especially as moving on from these jobs is a scary and worrying prospect for the workers concerned. But the consequences of failing to get off fossil fuels is scary and worrying for everyone. There is no long-term future for gas either way; as if we don’t transition away from fossil fuels, these jobs will go up in smoke alongside everyone else’s anyway. Pretending that this is not the case does GMB members in that sector, *and* the rest of us, no favours.

The GMB argue, rightly, that the transition must be *“worker led”*, but their proposal that *“rapid transition”* should be replaced by *“well planned transition”* sets up a contradiction where there isn’t one. The transition has to be well planned *and* rapid.

They concede this in a later point that adds “*well planned*” to “*urgent*”; so, if they concede that we have to act with urgency, “*well planned*” should not be a euphemism for delay. The slower we move the harder this will be, and the greater the chances that we will fail. As the installers of radar put it in 1940, “*second best tomorrow is better than best too late*”. Needs must. We’d appeal to the GMB delegates to look at the news, think how bad this is now, how much worse it’s going to get; and how fast we have to move to avert the worst damage.

Their proposal that the “*combines*” envisaged in the motion should be confined to the workers “*affected*” is overstating the obvious; that a Just Transition in transport will be driven by transport workers and their unions, and the revolution in thinking that we need in the education sector will be led by the education unions, and so on, but we will need cross sectoral organisation too and can’t allow ourselves to be siloed.

Seeking to add “*working with unions affected*” to the remit of the “*a national climate service*” implies that some workers are not affected by climate breakdown, that this is an issue peculiar to workers in high carbon sectors, but, the fact is, we are all threatened and affected by it. Anyone arguing this line should be asked to point to anyone in the hall who is unaffected by climate change and doesn’t need it stopping.

In seeking to delete engagement with “*community and climate justice groups*” (twice) they are seeking to cut the trade union movement off from the climate movement and, indeed, communities, on an issue on which we need the broadest and strongest united fronts we can get and implies that we have nothing to learn from them. In the crisis we are in, we all need to be working together not turning inwards.

Summary

This is an amendment that

- **Denies the science and puts workers and communities at risk**
- **Holds on to fossil fuels**
- **Turn our movement inwards and keeps us siloed**

In Motion 15 Industrial strategy is national security the GMB reasserts these points in a different form. While making a sound argument against neoliberalism, and for a planned industrial strategy instead of leaving everything to “*the market*” - already a consensus view at Congress - there are a number of points that jar, on the same lines as their amendment.

- When they say “*gas remains vital to powering UK manufacturing, from food and beverages to steel, as well as 22 million home boilers*” they are highlighting the scale of a problem. To labour the point, maintaining this level of dependence on any fossil fuel will be fatal.
- When they say “*national security is dependent on an economy with industry at its heart that works for all*” they are missing the point that, as the climate breaks down, there will be no security for anyone, national or otherwise. And, bluntly, when did capitalist industry ever “*work for all*”?
- When they say that “*decarbonisation must be led by the workers, industries and communities involved*” - they miss the point that *all* workers and communities are “*involved*”, whether we work in an “*industry*” or not. We are all affected. We are all threatened. Workers and unions in each sector should be pushing for the fastest possible decarbonisation. If we do not, we are putting a burden on everyone else. The tail cannot be allowed to wag the dog.
- When they talk of committing to “*an industrial strategy policy that maximises our domestic energy strengths for national security, with all assets and options part of the solution: nuclear, renewables and oil and gas production*”, they once again fail to notice that fossil fuels are part of the problem, not the solution to anything. To state the obvious again, maintaining fossil fuel use at our current level is incompatible with stopping climate change.

And we can’t afford to look at this in an insular way. The fate of people in these islands is completely bound up with the fates of people all around the world. If we don’t cooperate with other countries to stop climate change, including those that our governments see as “*systemic competitors*” there will be no security for anyone. There is no “*national security*” at the expense of others.

Their interpretation of “*our (sic) domestic energy strengths*” is also not spelled out, but implies maxing out fossil fuel reserves, even though these do not belong to us but belong to multinational fossil fuel companies who will sell the products on the world market. Very profitable for them. Very damaging for us because of the emissions they will cause. None of these assets can be said to be “*ours*” because we don’t

own them; and are unlikely to in the immediate term. A realistic assessment of “domestic energy strengths” is the immense potential for the capacity for onshore and offshore wind, solar and, in the longer term, tidal energy.

- When they argue for “backing the build of Sizewell C, and supporting small modular reactors (SMRs)” they are backing a mainstream political consensus that aims to do exactly that. However, the relative costs of nuclear energy, projected to be even greater for SMRs, the long lead in times for construction and eye watering cost overruns already evident at Sizewell, will increase the per unit of electricity overall, so, as renewables grow rapidly, these may become white elephants that are surplus to requirements before they are built. The danger with Sizewell is also that, having cut out a Chinese Nuclear Company precisely on “national security” grounds, there is a huge investment gap that could suck in state investment that could be more productively deployed to renewables (which are generating more electricity at lower cost), thereby increasing fuel bills and poverty.
- When they say “working with the UK government on procurement policy which prioritises domestic supply chains, unionised jobs and workers’ voices” the emphasis on unionised jobs and workers’ voices is a consensus across the movement. But we have to bear in mind that any successful domestic production of any component for any energy source also has export potential, and workers here could lose jobs if countries importing them also “prioritise domestic supply chains” - as the United States has done with the Inflation Reduction Act. Protectionism cuts both ways and, in the end, everyone loses. We should never forget that Protectionism in the 1930s was part of the build up to war - and there will be no “national security” in that.

In sum, they rightly say that “The new government has the chance to put workers and communities at the heart of a new industrial strategy” but for that to work requires the wholesale mobilisation of the movement into a just transition that is envisaged by the UNISON and PCS motions, not this one.



Photo: flickr.com/photos/sasastro/

UNITE’s Motion 14 A workers’ transition for the North Sea rightly notes that

- “serious state investment and industrial planning on a scale not seen in decades, will be required deliver on” Labour’s “commitment to create 650,000 green jobs by 2030”
- and that “that climate change poses a systemic risk to working class communities”
- and calls for “creating 35,000 new green energy jobs in Scotland by 2030”
- which would require “additional funding of £1.1bn per year, a fraction of the oil profits made in recent years” implying taxation on these to pay for them.

But, in noting that “over 30,000 off-shore North Sea oil and gas jobs, plus seven to eight times that number in the supply chain, are under threat” they don’t identify that this comes from the natural decline of the North Sea oil and gas fields, not the shift to renewables. In fact, it is the growth of the offshore renewables sector that offers the only lifeline there is for offshore workers jobs.

As Platform have pointed out “The North Sea’s shift away from oil and gas production is already underway, as the basin’s reserves decline. Over the past decade, the number of jobs supported by the oil and gas industry in the UK has halved, with some 227,000 jobs lost since 2013. This is despite the UK government issuing roughly 400 new drilling licences over the same period and energy companies recording record breaking profits.”

So, the argument “that the new government has adopted an unhelpful arbitrary target to stop drilling in the North Sea, before any plan for jobs has been agreed” is right on one count, that no Just Transition Plan has yet been agreed, but wrong on two.

1. The government has not decided to stop drilling in the North Sea. Existing fields will continue to operate on a declining curve (see appendix below) so not only is there no cliff edge, but opening up new oil and gas fields *will not stop the decline*; and will therefore no more save the jobs in the next ten years than it did in the last.
2. The decision to stop new exploration, opening up new fields, is not “arbitrary” but in line with the scientific imperative. If every country opens up new fields, we will all cook; probably faster than we think.

UNITE is nevertheless right to argue for such a plan and it is remiss of the Government not to have made proposals and started negotiations on this from the off.

Over 60 climate campaigning organisations, including the GJA, have backed this call in an open letter sent to Party leaders in the run up to the General Election, **which you can read here.**

It also has to be said that this motion does not outline what such a plan would look like either. UNITE has been promising the outline of such a plan since the ban on new exploration was first mooted eighteen months ago. We think it's vital that they publish one and discuss it with the other North Sea unions. We would be delighted to promote it as soon as they do.

In the meantime, the outline proposals in the UNISON Motion look like a good starting point. *Negotiated transition plans that guarantee protection for all workers in all sectors of the economy including equality strands to cover jobs, wages, pensions, training and skills, and trade union rights.* The excellent and wide ranging demands developed with offshore workers by **Platform and FOE Scotland** are also a solid foundation for these discussions, as are the three demands in the open letter from the Climate Campaigns.

A UK-wide industrial strategy, which prioritises substantial investment in domestic manufacturing and skills, reorganises the tax system for public good, and expands publicly-owned renewable energy production. Only by expanding democratic control at all levels of our energy system and building community wealth, will we be able to create secure green jobs for fossil fuel workers, end fuel poverty, and ensure the benefits of the transition are retained by communities.

Worker involvement in every stage of just transition planning, by expanding sectoral collective bargaining across the energy industry and supply chain. This will enable workers and unions to negotiate just transition plans which meet climate targets and provide training and employment opportunities.

A Jobs Guarantee, providing financial support for every offshore and onshore oil and gas worker who is not supported by the above measures to find equivalent,

alternative employment or has to take time out of employment to undertake training. This 'guarantee' must include a wage and conditions floor, negotiated with recognised trade unions to ensure workers are not forced into low paid or unsafe jobs in the emerging renewables industry.

As there is now a quarterly meeting between the North Sea unions - GMB, UNITE, RMT and Prospect - with Ed Miliband's team, it makes sense for the unions concerned to coordinate demands for job guarantees, retraining passports, structured retraining and planned redeployment and put them forward at these meetings. The whole climate and labour movements could then get in behind them and push, if there is any reluctance at the top.

The ban "on new licences for drilling" is already in place. Getting the plan in place is, therefore, even more urgent.

Finally,

- "rising geopolitical tension" is exacerbated by climate breakdown and fossil fuels are a key source of that tension,
- they will not be abandoned, but we do need to wean ourselves off them as fast as we can,
- we do know how they will be replaced, as they already are being replaced with significantly more green jobs coming onstream than **government predictions** each year;
- and "jobs and communities" will be protected by the most rapid possible expansion of renewables into the North Sea.

The ban is an ecological imperative. The plan is a social imperative. The whole movement should campaign for it flat out.



Appendix: Why opposition to the ban won't save jobs

North Sea oil and gas are in sharp decline and will continue to be so whether there is new investment or not.

Production of oil has gone down from 150 million tonnes in 2000 to 36 million last year, that's three quarters of production lost in 23 years.

Production of gas has gone down from 110 million tonnes of oil equivalent in 2000 to 31 million tonnes last year, that's more than two thirds of production lost in the same period.

These figures are from the North Sea Transition Authority. Its projection for UK Oil and Gas demand up to 2050 is that it will end up as 10 million tonnes for Gas and 15 million tonnes for Oil. So, even if it were possible for all this were to be produced in the North Sea - which it isn't - their projected demand is less than half of current oil production and a third of current gas production.

The drop in projected production in the North Sea is severe even if there is investment in new fields.

- Production of oil is presently 0.7 million barrels a day. On NSTA projections, by 2050 that will be down to 0.1 million barrels a day with no additional fields, and around 0.15 million barrels if they are developed. That means that, even with new fields developed, production will be less than a quarter of what it currently is and a seventh if they are not.
- In the case of gas, current production is 0.55 million barrels a day. Even with new fields, this will be down to 0.04 million barrels. Without new fields it will be 0.02 million barrels. That means that, even with new fields developed, production will be less than a thirteenth of what it currently is. Without them, it will be less than one twenty seventh of what it currently is.

The impact of such a sharp contraction, even with new fields, makes a transition plan away from oil and gas and towards renewables an imperative for unions concerned with jobs offshore.

As the difference between production levels with new fields and those without is so marginal that making an issue of campaigning for new fields to be developed is a diversion, even if there were no climate imperative to stop them.

*The **Offshore Wind Industry Council** projects 70,000 additional jobs (in addition to the **32,000 already employed**) 10,000 a year, between 2023 and 2030 just to cope with "the expected offshore wind project pipeline". That compares with 86,000 offshore oil and gas workers in 2019, already down to 30,000 now.*

With production, and demand projected to fall so sharply, and assuming jobs fall in proportion, even with new fields, we're looking at at least 22,500 jobs that will be gone no matter what; and that is the scale that the Transition Plan has to address.

The graphs in the **North Sea Transition Authority production and expenditure projections report** are quite striking on all this.

Editor's note: there are several other good motions that mention climate, from BFAWU, Aegis, ASLEF, RMT and others, and several that have an unacknowledged climate dimension.

The comments above are on the core motions pending composites that will produce the final agenda in early September. We will produce a second edition of this special issue to take the new form of motions and those not covered in detail here into account.

In the meantime, we welcome feedback on any aspect of this discussion. Please feel free to email the editor at paulatkin54@hotmail.com