

“Energy and Climate as Labour Issues”

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I place great store on this meeting – and other meetings with labour unions. I firmly believe that no solution to climate crisis, no energy transition worthy of the name, is possible without active involvement of, and leadership from, workers, particularly those at the sharp end of climate change and “energy”; of those who do not have the luxury of acting as if the status quo is still an option.

I say this because I firmly believe that, at heart, climate is not just an issue of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other molecules; and energy is not just a question of electrons. Both are labour issues.

They are a labour issue because – most obviously – any solution to climate change, any energy transition, means moving away from fossil fuels. And a *just* transition means retrenching thousands of workers involved in the fossil fuel industries. Leaving it to the market – to forced closures – is a recipe for broken communities, broken lives and wasted opportunities. Planning is needed. Planning that involves the active collaboration and participation of labour.

They are a labour issue because renewable energy, refurbishing housing and the like offer huge opportunities for creating jobs. But what sort of jobs? Low paid, zero hour contracts? Or jobs that bring dignity. Jobs that are not premised on capitalist forms of work. Again, addressing this issue will surely require the active involvement of the labour movement.

But energy and climate are also labour issues because, as South Africa’s Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) puts it, they are also issues about who controls “the framework of democratic and accountable resource allocation”.¹ And this is an issue of the relationship between capital and labour in society. Should energy generation be run for profit – at the expense of labour – or run for the wider benefit of society under social ownership?

These are all issues that the labour movement internationally has been pressing hard to be addressed. But at a time when mainstream “solutions” to climate change are clearly proving inadequate, further probing of the entanglements between labour, energy and climate

¹ Keynote Address to African National Congress National Meeting on Electrification, University of Cape Town 1992, cited in Paul Theron (ed.), *Proceedings of the ANC National Meeting on Electrification*, University of Cape Town, February 1992, published by African National Congress, Department of Economic Planning/Centre for Development Studies 1992.

might be helpful in developing a more nuanced understanding of the many blockages to change.

One obvious entanglement is the intimate connection between climate, energy and the squeezing of labour to extract maximum surplus value.

China, for example, is now “the chimney of the world”. Between 2000 and 2006, CO₂ emissions rose by 55%. Almost half of that increase was directly attributable to the production of commodities that were shipped overseas – half of them produced by joint ventures or increasingly wholly foreign-owned companies. And that increase in CO₂ emissions doesn’t take account of emissions caused by the construction of factories and highways to service them, apartment blocks for workers and so on. China’s emissions surge cannot be explained, in other words, by a boom in domestic consumption or “changing Chinese lifestyles” or attempts to expand energy infrastructure and other services to poorer people. On the contrary, the growth of coastal industries, fuelled by foreign direct investment (FDI), has been associated with an explosion of protest – from suicides at Foxconn (the world’s largest electronics manufacturer) to strikes, demonstrations and other protests.

So why have investors moved to China? Is it to escape stricter pollution controls at home? No: the cost of complying with environmental regulation has seldom been a significant factor in investment decisions.

Is it a response to demands by “western consumers”? We certainly consume many of the goods. But it is absurd to suggest that the CO₂ emissions have been caused by western consumers insisting they will buy only Chinese goods.

No, if “the working class now have a Chinese address”, to use Zizek’s phrase,² it is primarily because companies have relocated to China because labour there is cheaper and more disciplined – and because the rate of surplus value extraction promises to be higher. And this transfer has been possible only through a new round of massive consumption of fossil fuels. The linkage between climate change and labour could not be clearer.

This should not surprise us. Historical research by academics such as Andreas Malm has scrupulously documented how the adoption use of fossil fuels has been intimately woven into the history variously of controlling labour, shifting production around the globe in search of cheaper labour, increasing competitiveness through replacing labour-saving machines, and the speeding up of exchange (and the attendant squeezing of labour time) through just-in-time delivery, faster transport systems, and so on.

If we look back at the early history of industrialisation in Britain, for example, it was not price that persuaded early cotton mill owners to switch from water to coal as an “energy” source for their mills; it was the opportunities opened up for squeezing labour by bringing coal-fired steam engines to towns where it was easier to procure labour “trained to industrious habits”.

² Quoted in Nicholas Hildyard and Larry Lohmann, *Energy, Work and Finance*, The Corner House, Sturminster Newton, Dorset, March 2014, p.46. Available at: <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/energy-work-and-finance>.

There are lessons here, particularly at a time when mainstream climate “solutions” aimed at achieving an energy transition through market mechanisms (such as the EU emissions trading system, ETS) are proving a busted flush.

One lesson is this. Capital will cling to oil, gas and coal for as long as possible. No other source of thermodynamic work – which is how capital views energy – is as convenient. Oil, coal and gas can be transported relatively easily. They can be stored easily – and freely by nature. They can provide 24/7 thermodynamic work in the remotest regions without having to build new supergrids or to develop as yet non-existent forms of storing electricity. They don’t require the redesign of whole cities. And so on.

So moving from oil, coal and gas is not simply a matter of getting prices right, or replacing oil, gas and coal-fired plants with renewables or finding new sources of energy to power cars. The entanglements of fossil fuels with industrial capitalism are too embedded to permit such an apolitical approach. Much more is being taken on that just power plants. For fossil fuels are commodities whose extraction, use and control are fundamental to the shaping of labour relations and the extraction of surplus value. To neglect this is not only to risk being side-tracked by “solutions” which are frankly impractical or which are likely to end up with renewables playing an “add on” role in predominantly fossil fuel energy systems, to the detriment of human and non-human survival; it is also to risk crushing defeats because the scale of the political forces lined up against change. While many might shy from “taking on capitalism”, the entanglements between capital and fossil fuels are such that to challenge a fossil fuel plant *is* to challenge modern capitalism.

Many over-simple “renewables-can-replace-fossil-fuels” exercises fail to recognise this – and consequently underestimate the challenge posed to alternative energy generation precisely because they ignore or downplay the role that modern energy plays in controlling and squeezing labour through enabling capital to relocate around the globe, through enabling round-the-clock factory shifts and the economies-of-scale that make it possible to exploit more and more inaccessible sources of cheap labour and cheap resources.

We ignore these political and economic realities at our peril. Fossil fuels are not a mere incidental, or detachable, part of industrial society. They are integral to continued accumulation. And unless we put labour – and resistance to capitalist forms of work - at the heart of the debate on energy transitions, we are unlikely to see transformative change.

And that is what I hope we might be able to explore a little more today.

Thank you.