

# PSYCHOLOGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE: *Collective Solutions to a Global Problem*

*On 23 September 2010, in his Joint British Academy/British Psychological Society Lecture, Professor David Uzzell argued that behaviour-change approaches to climate change need to take account of the societal context that gives rise to the values and attitudes that drive our behaviours. As consumers, our preferences and actions – and as a consequence our greenhouse gas emissions and the impact we have on the environment – are shaped by the products and opportunities we are offered, which create new desires and preferences. In the following extract, Professor Uzzell looks at the societal forces influencing our practices and identities as workers.*

**W**HETHER WE are looking to 'greener' technologies, or seeking to take a more radical stance and achieve 'prosperity without growth' as my colleague Tim Jackson puts it, production and thus jobs will be affected. Even policies that centre predominantly on consumption – changing consumption through changing behaviour – will create less or changed demands, and will influence production processes indirectly. Therefore, we ought to investigate how workers and management relate to climate change and to the policies that are developed to combat it.

The first step we have taken to research this is a project being undertaken with my Swedish colleague, Professor Nora Räthzel (University of Umeå) and financed by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research. In this, we are examining the climate change policies of trade unions in the Global North and the Global South – since climate change is an issue that has to be tackled globally. In another project, which will start next year, funded by the European Union, we will examine the relationships between management, trade unions, and workers in two plants in Sweden and the UK, as we also need to ask what kind of policies are developed by producers, workers and management alike.

## Official trade union policies

Trade unions are typically not seen as standing at the frontline of combating climate change. They are often perceived to be reluctant to change, and hostile to any kind of legislation that might threaten jobs. And workers in the major carbon-emission industries – steel, cement manufacturing, transport – are doubly condemned as these industries are perceived to have a major responsibility for climate change – no matter that the power workers are producing power to heat the buildings we are in at the moment or the metalworkers manufacture the cars we want to drive.

This is an inaccurate perception. The TUC in this country has been running a highly effective Green Workplaces programme. The Blue Green Alliance in the USA started as a collaboration between the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club to expand the number and quality of jobs in the green economy and now includes a wide range of labour organisations and environmental NGOs.

In our research study, we have interviewed senior trade union policy-makers and officers, from both North and South – Europe, Brazil, South Africa, India and Malaysia. We spoke to people in global and international trade union confederations (International Trade Union

Confederation [ITUC]; European Trade Union Confederation), as well as in sectoral national, international and global unions (e.g. International Metalworkers' Federation, International Transport Workers' Federation).

One of the major planks of trade union policies is the concept of 'Just Transition'. As the ITUC policy states, there is a need 'to create green and decent jobs, transform and improve traditional ones and include democracy and social justice in environmental decision-making processes'.

But while the ITUC has recognised that 'the main victims of climate change will be the workers, in particular in developing countries, whose sole responsibility will be to have been born poor in the most fragile parts of the planet', and that 'trade unions engage in current climate negotiations with a message of commitment, solidarity and action', it is acknowledged that jobs may have to go and jobs may have to change. 'Just transition' is far from easy to implement. One of the goals of our project is to understand better some of these challenges as exemplified by two of our interviewees from the metalworkers union.

## Challenge

One Canadian union official argued "'Green jobs" is a term from the environmental movement, not the labour movement.' This was expressed even more strongly by another senior trade unionist, who saw the traditions of his industry and the identity of its workforce being challenged by the notion of greenness:

Green jobs are insulting. Steel are brown jobs. You can't build windmills and aircraft without steel. The steel job is a green job. A rigger is a rigger when he is working in a brown or green job. What is a green boss? A green boss is still a boss. A green capitalist is still a capitalist? Vestas – they might be green, but they are ... still bosses. (Jim)

So the kind of questions we are asking are:

- 1 How are the causes and consequences of climate change framed at a policy level in the context of jobs versus environment and the offshoring of jobs from the Global North to the Global South where there are lower wages, less regulated working conditions and weaker environmental regulations?
- 2 What are the drivers/constraints on international co-operation and solidarity? To what extent do national interests trump internationalism and global solidarity?
- 3 What are the psychological barriers at the collective and individual level to a 'just transition'?



Photo:  
Walter Hodges/  
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### Lorry driving

The two quotes above raise forcefully the issue of identity and the social impact of transformed production. A senior policy-maker in one of the international trade union bodies – whom we call Julio – provides an example of how political and technological changes are related to broader societal problems. He demonstrates that one cannot tackle environmental issues without addressing the social and the psychological:

Because, for example, the social problem of (...) road transport. ... it's not easy, because the position of the driver is a real position in society. When you are a driver, it's the same thing as when you are a miner: you do not have a high qualification but you have a real job — and you have real recognition. (...) You have a real identification. Because when you are a (...) young boy, you play with – a car, and you hope to become a driver. (...) It's not a technical problem. We know the technical problem perfectly well now. (...) It's to change the social image and to change the population.

What Julio is referring to is that people still see work as a central part of their life. Steel workers, chemical workers, or, as in Julio's example, lorry drivers, are proud of their work and their skills. Their aim is to do 'a job well for its own sake', as Richard Sennett puts it.<sup>1</sup> But Julio is also referring to another aspect of people's work: jobs are articulated in terms of a certain way of being in the world, they give people a sense of purpose, and imply a specific 'way of life' that is associated with specific kinds of work. In the case of a long-distance driver, this is adventure, independence and freedom. Julio speaks about identification with a 'position in society'. In other words, work identities are not mere individual identities. They develop within a process in which people occupy positions that have existed long before they occupied them and will continue to exist after they have left them.

The lorry driver connotes a certain type of masculinity, associated with technology, the conquest of foreign lands, individuality, and independence. The lorry driver might be seen as something like the 'Marlboro Man' of the road. We get a sense of the way in which driving a lorry is a male thing to do, when we see the difficulties of recognition that female lorry drivers suffer.

This kind of representation of lorry drivers makes sense in opposition to jobs which are not only alienating but appear to subordinate masculinity – such as those jobs men undertake in offices, who don't have control over powerful technologies and which, from the point of view of manual workers, appear as 'pushing paper' and doing 'feminised work'.

Threatening industries threatens jobs, which in turn threatens identities. And this is a potential major barrier to change. How can we formulate 'just transition' policies and practices that recognise this? Can we provide new jobs, green jobs, decent and non-precarious jobs that not only enable the construction of new identities but also positive identities in the context of carbon-reduced production?

### Conclusion

I was struck by another comment from Julio who said

Sustainable development is a possibility to build a new project for humanity. Because nobody knows what a sustainable society should look like. So each trade union in the world, each person in the world, each population in the world, has the possibility to express their views and their opinion in order to build this project. ... it's very important to have a real co-operation with other countries ... [and (my addition) communities and individuals].

What Julio is suggesting is a vision of a sustainable society could be seen not as a threat or a sacrifice but as an opportunity – an opportunity for which all of us have a responsibility to create a world in which our relations with others and nature are more equitable and just.

I am sure some of you are familiar with the African saying 'a person is a person through other persons'. This speaks about our interconnectedness. We are our social relations. Community, well-being, rootedness to the environment, quality of life, beliefs and identity are always lived out among others. An individual's well-being is caught up in the well-being of others and it is from others and with others that we learn, teach and act. It will be through working with and through others that we may have a chance to solve the serious social, economic and environmental problem we call climate change.

### Note

1 R. Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London, New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

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An audio recording of the whole lecture may be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary](http://www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary)

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