

Bread & Roses: Workers as Agents of Degrowth

Nora Rathzel

Policy Brief



Context

Wars, the rising costs of living, increasing inequality, and the global ecological emergency are increasingly threatening the well-being of Europeans. This crisis of life on earth is **inadequately answered by existing green policies, which are limited by their obsession with technological innovation and GDP-centric measures of success**. Degrowing our oversized economy is the only way to reduce its material footprint in favor of people and the planet.

The question of labour is key in the way the polycrisis is addressed. **The transformation of economic and industrial processes must begin with those who power them: rank-and-file workers.** At first sight, degrowth seems to be contrary to workers' interests, i.e., their need for an economy that provides good quality jobs. However, the reality is more complex.

Problem diagnosis

All workers have multiple identities, allegiances, and desires, but they are only defined according to how much they earn or how productive they are. They are **stripped of their status and power as citizens, and kept from acting collectively**. Workers cannot cooperate meaningfully because they have no authority over how they work together, nor what, how, how much, and for whom they produce. As a result workers are **unable to act on their collective responsibility towards the social and ecological commons**.

There is an alternative: workers have the skills and knowledge to take control and develop alternative ways of producing. Most want to take pride in their work and develop socially and ecologically useful forms of production. **Rank-and-file workers must be understood as agents of change** and included in **a new social dialogue to bring about this societal transformation**. The key is to enable a process in which diverse social actors with different competences and ideas but common interests collaborate and learn from each other.

Policy recommendations

Bringing workers into the conversation requires **institutionalizing bottom-up transformation processes** into decision-making spaces at local, national, and European levels.

What role should unions, political parties, NGOs, and the degrowth community play in supporting worker-led transformation strategies?

Trade Unions

- Organize **open and democratic workers' assemblies** at the shop floor level to produce independent, worker-led visions of the future for each industrial sector.
- Bring in **researchers and other experts into these assemblies** to support the development of comprehensive, viable recommendations.

Degrowth Community

- Conduct **empirical research in collaboration with workers** to better understand and include their conflicting needs into a degrowth perspective.
- **Communicate with industrial workers** on the destructive logic of unlimited growth and the benefits of alternative forms of work.

Political parties and NGOs

- **Listen to and discuss with workers** in their assemblies.
- Incorporate suggestions into their policies to create a **connection between workers' expertise and institutionalised politics**.
- Work together with unions to create workers' **assemblies at the European level** composed of delegates from local and regional workers' assemblies across Europe.

European Union

- **Provide resources to support unions** in creating workers' assemblies at the European level.
- Include **workers from all genders, ages, and qualifications**, and from all sectors.
- Synthesise the suggestions developed on the ground and **translate them into political proposals** that would be taken into the European Parliament and other EU institutions.

Next steps...

Nora Räthzel

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Find out more

Read the full policy brief on the R&Di website.

Further reading on labor studies :

- Räthzel, N., Stevis, Dimitris (2025). The role of labour and nature within just transition strategies. The Elgar Companion to Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals
- Räthzel, N. (2023). Society – Labour – Nature: the Potential of Conflict, Critical sustainability sciences: intercultural and emancipatory perspectives
- Räthzel, N.; Uzzell, David (2019). The future of work defines the future of humanity and all living species. International Journal of Labour Research

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