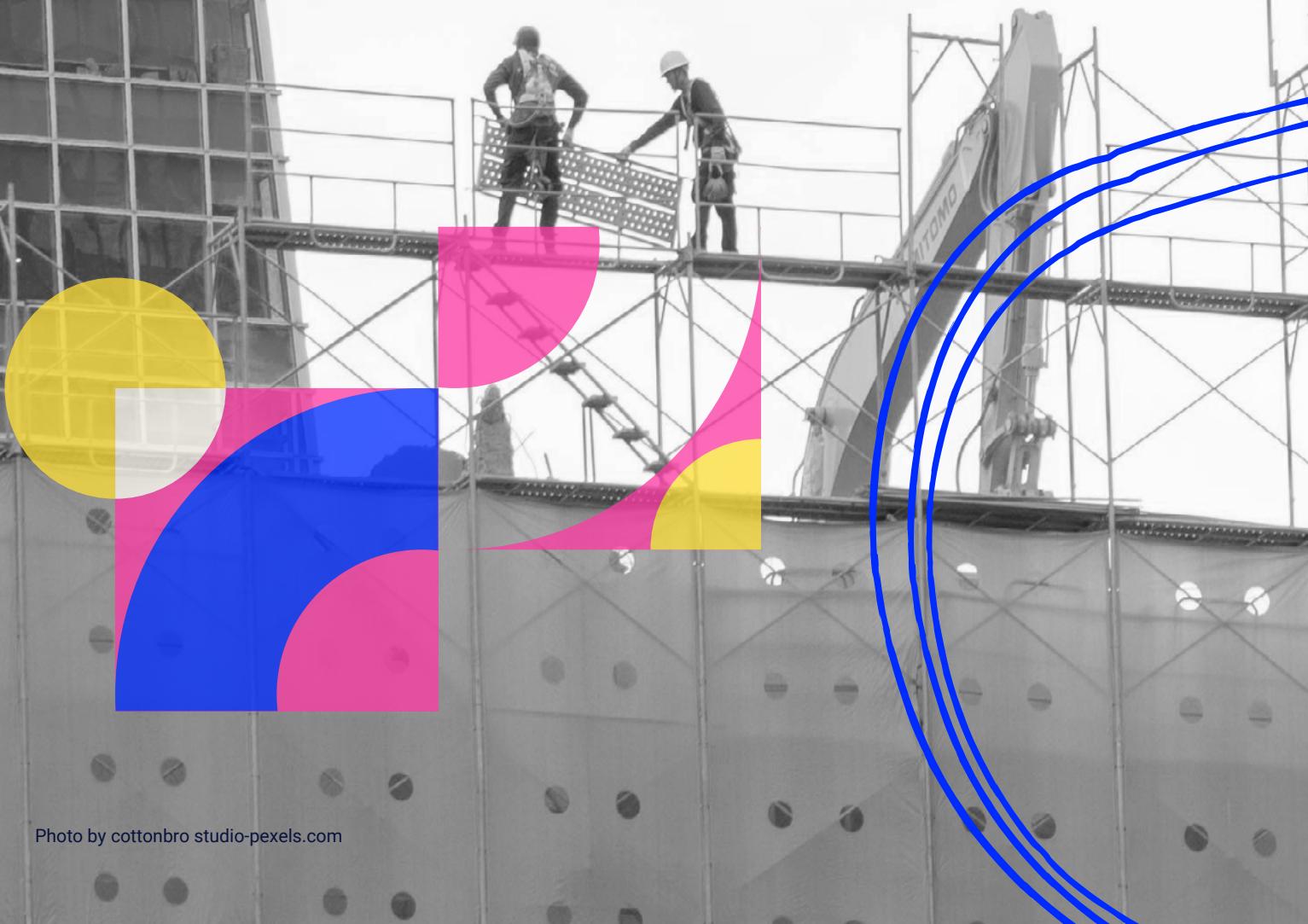


'Bread & Roses': workers as agents of degrowth

Author: Nora Räthzel



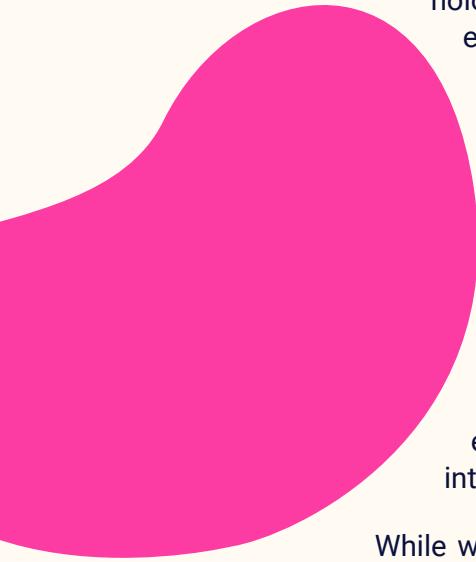
'Bread & Roses': workers as agents of degrowth



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"I work for a living, but what sense does that make, if I cannot live?" asks Alexis, a worker in a Spanish copper factory, explaining why he now rejects overtime. Listening to grassroots workers' needs can take us beyond a narrow paradigm of 'no jobs without growth' towards an ecologically and socially just transformation that does not depend on growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Focusing on Europe, this brief argues that such a transformation requires a new social dialogue that includes rank-and-file workers as change agents.

Many crises are haunting Europe and the world: wars, the rising costs of living, increasing inequality, and, above all, the global ecological emergency. We are confronted with climate breakdown, drought, water waste and pollution, the acidification of oceans, the deterioration of arable land, and the loss of forests and biodiversity. We are facing a crisis of life on earth due to a mode of production based on unlimited growth. Existing green policies tend to concentrate on techno-



logical fixes (such as renewable energy, electric vehicles, hydrogen, green steel, etc.) believing that 'green growth' is the solution. New technologies are necessary, but they cannot solve the crisis alone and if they are implemented at the scale of a growing global economy their ecological footprint concerning material, transport, and waste is likely to be enormous.

Trade unions are caught in a trap: green GDP growth and the development of new technologies seem the only way out of a future of high unemployment, increased inequality, a dwindling social welfare state. However, GDP growth – green or not – measures the money value of production, independent of what kind of things are produced, thereby leading to an increased usage of energy and materials. GDP growth will thus perpetuate the ecological crisis, which in turn will not only cost more jobs but also many [lives](#).

Some form of 'degrowth' will be necessary at a societal level. This calls for an abandonment of the blind pursuit of GDP growth as a goal, scaling down destructive and unnecessary forms of production to reduce energy and material use, and focussing economic activity around securing human needs and [well-being](#). At first sight, degrowth seems to be contrary to workers' interests – their need for an economy that provides good quality jobs. But workers' interests are more complex than this.

While workers do fear the loss of their jobs, they would also prefer to work less, to produce socially useful products that do not destroy the nature that nurtures them and other species. Workers have demonstrated that they have the knowledge, creativity, and ingenuity to become actors for a profound transformation. Their stories show that realising their needs without GDP growth is the best way to save the planet and provide a good life for all working people in Europe and beyond. We begin with a look at history, since, as William Faulkner said, "the past is never dead. It's not even past".

Workers want Bread... and Roses too

'Workers want bread', is a time-honoured truism: surely, workers, like all human beings, want food, housing, health, and the security that these things will always be available. Trade unions, founded in the middle of the 19th century, fought for decent wages, job security, and occupational health. But there was something else on their agenda too: a reduction of working hours. Workers – women, men, and children – laboured for 12 to 16 hours a day: there was no time to live, no time to flourish. To counter these working conditions, trade unions organised education, readings, communal life. In Austria they organised weekends in nature (Naturfreunde or Friends of Nature); in Britain they won the 'right to roam' through the countryside despite opposition from private landowners.

Unionists in the women's suffrage movement described this other dimension of workers' needs: "woman is the mothering element in the world and her vote will go toward helping forward the time when life's Bread, which is home, shelter and security, and the Roses of life, music, education, nature and books, shall be the heritage of every child that is born in the country, in the government of which she has a voice". (Getting out the Vote, Helen Todd, 1911). In 1913, a strike of 20 000, mostly migrant women mill workers in Lawrence (USA) demanded "bread and roses". Even when workers lived in dire

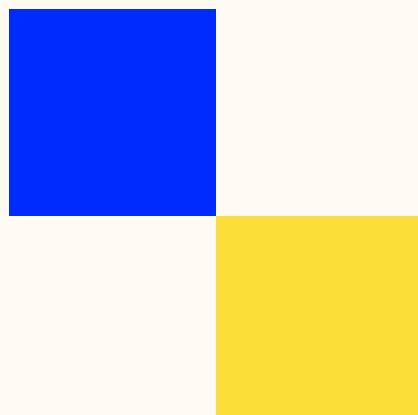
conditions, badly paid, their health in danger, their working hours leading to premature deaths (as is still the case in too many jobs, specifically in the global south), they wanted more than “bread”; they wanted “roses” too, a dignified and meaningful life. The workers’ struggle for “roses” meant working less and living more. A struggle that chimes well with the needs of a degrowth society; this is not just a thing of the past.

Work less, Live more – Everyday Degrowth

Today, workers suffer from burn-out; they want to work less and spend more time in their communities. In the Netherlands, 75 per cent of women work [part-time](#) because they want to, even though it means earning less. Millennials prefer a [work-life balance](#) to higher salaries. A Spanish [study](#) of tech workers found that, among those who wanted to change their working lives, 64.5 per cent of women and 56.7 per cent of men wanted to work less.

Reducing waged working time to reduce production, giving workers more time for other activities, and distributing work to avoid unemployment, are some of the [key suggestions](#) of degrowth researchers and campaigners. To compensate for the reduction of paid employment they suggest: a universal basic (care) income, free access to social services, a cap on house rents, and a maximum income. The creation of a single transparent pay scale that includes workers along the supply chain and a maximum [income](#) can free up resources for a basic income. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) [found](#) that CEOs of the richest companies earned 380 times more than the average worker. Other systems exist: in the world’s largest cooperative, Mondragon, the income of CEOs [cannot be more than 6 times higher](#) than that of the average worker in the cooperative, whose salary is already 17 times higher than that of the average Spanish worker.

Reducing paid working time gives workers more time for their life as citizens. However, a division is made between workers and citizens, which hampers this perspective.



Workers vs. Citizens

Everybody who is not a rentier can be called a worker, but positions differ in terms of income, dependency on employers, the degree of control over work. All workers have multiple identities which come with different allegiances and desires: parents, sons and daughters, city or country dwellers, maybe musicians, gardeners, and unionists.

These identities can be lived as if there is no relationship between them, as if work is defined only by how much one can earn, while life outside work is defined only by friendships, enjoyment, fulfilment. This divide repeats itself in political discourses when unions are accused of fighting only for 'their own, individualistic interests'. Thus, the government accused the striking health workers in the UK of endangering the lives and health of their patients. This ignores the fact that health workers are also patients, parents, daughters and sons, and that striking for better pay and more staff, and against long hours is also a struggle for a better healthcare system for everyone: "The entire NHS team is absolutely determined to stand firm for better patient care," as one key trade union [states](#). When health workers strike it is also because their identity as carers is threatened, as the resources they are given to do their job well are inadequate. Speaking about workers as only 'wanting bread' disregards that workers are citizens too. When women workers at the beginning of the 20th century demanded bread and roses, safe workplaces, and a dignified life outside work, they were pushing against this divide, but it still remains in place. It is worth looking deeper into this divide.

Workers' lack of control and citizens' freedom

The workplace is a place of collectiveness. Workers need to relate to each other for the process to succeed. However, workers cannot decide how they work together, nor what, how, how much, and for whom they produce. The workplace alienates them from their humanity, from their need to decide collectively how they want to work. As citizens, workers' degree of control increases, many of them may experience their home as a space of freedom. But it is a space lacking collectiveness, citizens are individualised. Thus, individual freedom is often defended without including its complement: responsibility towards the social and ecological commons. At work collectiveness is thrust upon workers, as citizens, they are deprived of it.

This divide between workers and citizens is reflected in the divide between labour and nature. At work nature is turned into 'raw materials' that workers must transform into goods. For capital, damage to nature is an externality for which they are not responsible and workers are drawn into this irresponsibility. Yet, as citizens, they enjoy nature, but for private pleasure. Therefore, love of nature does not necessarily translate into caring for nature as the life support system of humans and other species. However, it can be a point of departure for a degrowth policy: it is one of the pleasures that can be enjoyed without economic growth and it can become, and often is, the beginning of an insight into the dependence of humans on non-human nature.

Citizens' freedom is contradictory because it lacks collectiveness, but so is workers' alienation. While, as the German Confederation of Unions (DGB) put it, "democracy ends at the factory [gates](#)", workers do have the skills and knowledge to take control and develop alternative ways of producing. A historical and a present-day example show that workers want to take pride in their work and develop socially and ecologically useful forms of production.

Producers' Pride: A Corporate Plan Created by Workers

In the 1970s, the UK defence manufacturer Lucas Aerospace employed 18 000 manual and staff workers across 17 sites producing mainly military equipment. To coordinate demands they created the *Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee* consisting of unions for staff and manual workers across all 17 factories. The Labour government reduced military spending and Lucas planned to make redundant thousands of workers, claiming it was necessary to remain competitive. In 1974, the then-Secretary of State Tony Benn encouraged the Lucas workers to develop an alternative production strategy. Mike Cooley, a member of the committee, argued: "the only way we could be involved in a corporate plan would be if we drew it up in a way which challenged the private profit motive of the company and talked in terms of *social profit*."

Workers made an inventory of the materials, machines, and skills available and proposed ideas for products that would "meet the unmet needs of those who suffer from social deprivation and lack of power". Over 100 projects were suggested: medical equipment, improved braking systems, energy conservation, and oceanics, as well as cutting edge green products like heat pumps, solar cell technology, wind turbines, and fuel cell technology. While ecological sustainability was not high on the political agenda, it was not unfamiliar either. The first UN Human Environment Conference took place 1972 in Stockholm, calling for an [action plan](#) including a search for renewable energy. The Club of Rome's publication, '*Limits to Growth*' was published in the same year. The Lucas plan was widely praised and in 1981 the Combine Shop Stewards Committee received the Right Livelihood award for "designing and promoting the theory and practice of human-centred, socially useful production". The outpouring of suggestions for 'socially useful work' demonstrated not just workers' skills but their interest in producing things they could be proud of, because they met the needs of people and planet.

A Lucas Plan for today

The workers at a [bus factory](#) in Florence (Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds Limited, GKN) show how struggling to keep jobs can transform into a struggle for socially and ecologically useful products with degrowth perspective. When the factory was closed in 2021 its workers occupied the factory and began fighting for their jobs, a fight that broadened into a plan for different kinds of jobs and a different way of working and living altogether. Their slogan is [#insorgiamo](#) (let's rise up). Their [demands](#) included: "stop the consumption of land, the destruction of aquifers, large useless productions. Nationalise automobile factories and include them into a pool producing public, ecologically sustainable means of transport. Relaunch public university research to design solutions that are truly ecologically sustainable. Public, free means of transport, control the cost of living, for climate justice." They have drawn the whole region into their [struggle](#), mobilised workers across Italy, and inspired activists and intellectuals [globally](#).

Unsatisfied with some of the work by their union – the Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici (FIOM) – in 2018 the workers had broadened it into a non-hierarchical factory collective, uniting workers' councils, union activists, unorganised workers, and external supporters. This is one of the explanations for the longevity of their struggle. Committed also to environmental issues, they connected with Fridays for Future and with them they began to develop a plan for a new production at their factory. The cooperation was not without tensions, for instance regarding the issue of degrowth. In the end all demands included the reduction of working hours and of large, useless production. Fridays for Future also learned and connected their struggle against the ecological crisis with workers' interests, stating: "We won't support any more layoffs and outsourcing under the pretext of an ecological transition. We won't stay silent in light of the exploitation of workers and resources. We produce too much and at an unsustainable pace; we need a serious new plan to ease the load on workers and the environment."

When the workers opened the doors of the occupied factory, economists and engineers from universities visited. This resulted in an alternative production plan at GKN combining the knowledge of workers and of researchers, exploring different scenarios including the continuation of the present production of axle shafts but only for buses and trains, and the production of electrolyzers for green hydrogen production. The importance of these examples is that they address the needs of workers in industrial sectors developing suggestion for a green transformation that is not based on growth, but on the quality and usefulness of the product for humans and nature.

The collective continues to build links with other workers and movements, visiting ecological farmers' associations and other factories threatened with shutdown and hoping to create sustainable products, not just one element. For now, one of their survival strategies is to offer canteen and childcare services to other workers in the region, breaking the barrier between production and reproduction.

The struggle of the GKN workers shows how divisions can be overcome in processes of resistance: the fight for jobs turned into a fight for socially useful work, for less working hours, for the protection of nature, and ultimately for the formation of a 'we' that includes environmental movements, blue-collar

and white-collar workers in their own and other [production](#) sectors, and researchers. Their example is an exemplar of a new form of workers' movement merging the fight for jobs with the fight for a [liveable planet](#).

What it also shows is while workers' needs to live more, work less, and produce socially useful products do not automatically translate into demands for degrowth and ecologically viable work, they can be connected. The first reaction of workers to losing their jobs is to protect what they have. To create a transformative struggle, a process is required in which diverse social actors with different competences and ideas but common interests collaborate and learn from each other.

Shifting the goal of production from making money, to making useful products brings the qualitative dimension of work into focus. It challenges production centred around quantity and growth. As producers of goods workers identify with their work. However, it is an identification that becomes precarious when the product is destructive and workers experience their lack of control as bad conscience: "I know that producing trucks is not good for the environment, but I cannot go home every evening and feel that I have done something bad the whole day" said a worker producing cabins for trucks in a transnational corporation.

The question is, what do trade unions and the degrowth community have to offer to support workers in mending the divide between citizens and workers and to strengthen their producers' pride against their alienation at work? The next sections will explore this.

Just Transition Policies – Workers as victims

If you looked for trade unions' just transition documents in 2006 there were just a handful. Since then, however, speaking to green unionists it becomes clear how much effort unions have invested to square the circle of protecting jobs and nature. In principle these goals are congruent. But in a hostile environment, where neither government policies nor companies' strategies are improving workers' wellbeing these goals clash. It is therefore not surprising that just transition documents of unions tend to focus on [creating green jobs](#), preferably more than will be lost through a green transition. While greening fossil fuel dependent industries (e.g. [steel](#)) are central policies, nothing is said about scaling them down.

Unions that demand both the greening and growing of industries (steel, hydrogen, electric cars, photovoltaic, wind turbines), view workers predominantly as wage workers, disregarding their needs as citizens and their desire to be proud of their work. This creates a perspective that reduces workers to victims in need of protection. This view deprives unions of their most powerful allies, shop-floor workers. While some workers might want predominantly protection, others resist the way in which some just transition policies deny them agency and make decisions for them, not with them. In an interview about the just transition policies of their union, one unionist in the UK said:

[We were talking about transferable skills. "Oh, well, car mechanics can fit heat pumps."](#) I was like, okay, what if you don't want to? ... Do you just get: "well, tough"? ...which was a lot of people's experience from that initial round of Just Transition. (UK).

Once upon a time workers were expected to lead the world revolution. Romanticising workers is not helpful, denying them agency is counterproductive.

Dissenting voices: trade unionists questioning the growth paradigm

There are many dissenting voices. Some come from unions which organise workers that do not work in sectors most threatened with job losses, like the [European Public Service Union](#) (EPSU): "the pursuit of profit maximisation and growth at all costs are a driver of climate change".

Other voices do come from unions, whose workers will be affected by climate mitigation like the German Metal Workers Union, (IG Metall). With its 2.2 million members it is the largest federation in Europe. Founded as a union of metal and mining blue-collar workers, it now includes engineers. In 1998 it was joined by the Textile and Clothing union and in 2002 by the Paper and Plastic union. It is a union with a history of broadening the scope of trade union engagement. In 2022 IG Metall held a [conference](#) celebrating the 50th anniversary of a Quality of Life congress they had held in [1972](#) dedicated to improving the quality of life, not only of working conditions, to care for the environment and reduce production and consumption. Two of the three 2022 keynote speakers took up the question of the environment: Hans Jürgen Urban, executive member of the union's board, pointed out that the "capitalist growth trap has resulted in dividing the unions, not in improving the general wellbeing of workers", "thereby leading us towards a climate catastrophe". He [suggested](#) a new trade union strategy to combine a "sustainable development of work, society, and nature". The first question it would have to ask, was: "what can grow and what cannot?" The criteria for new investments "should not be profits but the needs of people and nature". Elements of his ideas can be found in scenarios for the mobility sector that the IG Metall created together with the German branch of Friends of the Earth (BUND). In their desired [scenario](#), they agreed that 'sufficiency' should be the goal for future developments and that an organised reduction of sectors, similar to the exit from coal, was needed.

During the pandemic the Spanish union Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), the largest confederation in Spain, published a [brochure](#) of ideas for post-COVID recovery which opens: "reduce the consumption of energy, water and superfluous goods in the context of the scarcity of raw materials and global chemical contamination". In contrast to other unions, the text centres not only on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, but includes demands like small-scale ecological agriculture, the protection of biodiversity, localised production, protecting water etc. This is the most comprehensive just transition programme from a union in Europe. This is not to say that there are no conflicts within the union, especially concerning the reduction of consumption and production, as [other documents](#) show.

Degrowth policies regarding work and workers

Some degrowth authors draw suggestions from the lives and philosophies of indigenous communities and from alternative forms of living and working in the global north and south. They

[call for](#) “radical redistribution of income and wealth as well as of reproductive work (care), democratization of the economy, decentralization and de-concentration of the productive sectors.” A “degrowth subject”, they argue, already exists: “It is the subject of the nowtopians and eco-communities. It is to be found among the back-to-the-landers who work the land, or the city dwellers cultivating urban gardens, or occupying the squares. The open question is how it can spread and replicate.” ([Degrowth, A Vocabulary for a New Era](#): D’Alisa et. al. 2015).

Though mainstream workers in industries, services, and offices do not feature in these visions, these visions are not far away from what such workers imagine as a good life. In workshops with Spanish and Welsh shop floor workers, we asked them to draw a picture of the society they want to live in. Their images showed them living in a house in the countryside, caring for each other, their gardens and pets. Work hardly ever appeared and when it did it was reduced to a few hours in which they worked collectively.

But how to relate these longings for re-connecting with nature and with each other to the realities of present-day industrialised societies? How to connect them with the production of useful things like medicine, computers, cookers, cupboards, clothes, washing machines? Our everyday lives depend on things that are produced in industrialised, globally interdependent workplaces. These visions do not discuss how these industries can be transformed to become ecologically and socially viable.

Other degrowth authors suggest shorter working hours, compensated by a basic income, “job guarantees with a living wage, maximum income caps, declining caps on resource use and emissions.” ([Exploring Degrowth Proposals](#). Fitzpatrick. et. al. 2022). In a comprehensive presentation of such policies the authors discuss them as being “too vague” and argue:

So, which type of work-time reduction policies should be supported? Our findings suggest that it is ones that leverage productivity gains for working less, job guarantees, and job sharing. But how should we collectively negotiate how many days and hours to reduce paid work to? ([Exploring Degrowth Proposals](#)).

The authors spot the gap between policy suggestions and the complex realities they aim to change. But the “we” that should negotiate policies does not seem to include workers whose workplaces need to change or disappear. The question remains: how to bridge the divide between visions of another society and being trapped within the complexities of the everyday, torn between the needs for a job and the longing for a liveable planet?

Talking is good, listening is necessary – creating transformative strategies from the bottom up

The Lucas plan and the GKN plan were developed in moments of crisis when workers were threatened with or experienced layoffs. The knowledge and the experience, that we

are living a crisis of life on earth is growing. This could be the moment to turn politics around, creating a pathway to an ecological and social transformation in which shop floor workers become leading actors, since they are the ones, whose lives will need to change most dramatically and at the same time the ones with the specific knowledge needed to make change happen.

The task ahead is to institutionalise 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?

The role of trade unions – organising workers' assemblies at the shop floor level

The idea of workers' assemblies is being suggested by grassroots unionists. For example, members of the [union of aviation workers](#) presented a notion to their union UNITE in which they argue:

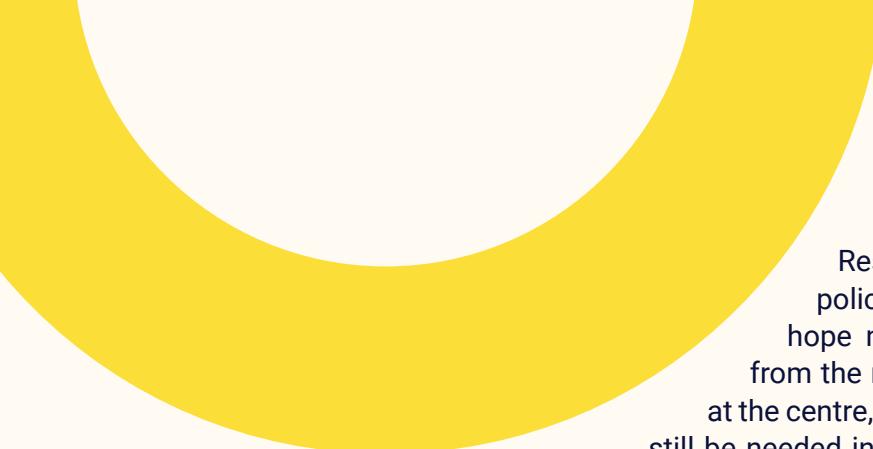
An open and democratic process, involving discussion to produce recommendations, incorporating worker owned perspectives to deliver positive action, is most likely to lead to success. The unions' role should be to foster those dialogues and encourage positive proposals, facilitating them within sectors and between sectors. The union must adopt the approach of 'Workers' Assemblies' to produce independent, worker-led visions of the sustainable future for each industrial sector.

The [Scottish oil and gas workers](#) write:

Social partnership instruments along the lines of Just Transition Commissions have shaped and governed transition processes for the phaseout of coal mining in countries like Germany and Spain. Trade unions and local governments were involved, securing infrastructure upgrades and alternative job creation, but there was no mechanism for rank-and-file workers to feed into planning.

Trade unions are the actors who could organise such workers' assemblies locally and regionally. Beginning with broader questions about how workers want to live and work in the future they could continue with analysis of their specific workplaces: what is their ecological footprint? What is the usefulness of the product, for whom, and how much is needed? Where do materials, tools, machines come from, where does the product go, once consumed? Such questions would include workers along the value chain in the global north and south, bringing workers in the global south into the planning process, a perspective that trade union just transition policies do not include. Bringing researchers and other experts into these assemblies like the GKN workers did, would support workers in developing a comprehensive, viable plan that connects suggestions for changes at the shop floor level with suggestions for change at the societal level. This is where the degrowth community can play a role.

The role of the degrowth community – dare to communicate with industrial workers



Researchers and activists developing degrowth policies need to come out of their comfort zone and hope not only for the “degrowth subject” to spread from the margins to the centre, but engage with workers at the centre, in industries. Industrialised, globalised work will still be needed in the global north and south to create societies in which a good life is possible without economic growth – whether it’s making a wind turbine, printing a school textbook, building a transport system, or producing medicines. Empirical research is needed to better understand and include the conflicting needs of mainstream workers into a degrowth perspective. The degrowth community has much to learn from workers’ everyday lives, but it has also much to give. Working with workers’ assemblies they could contribute their knowledge about the destructive logic of unlimited growth, alternative forms of work, care work, a better work-life balance, the creativity of the commons. As in the case of the GKN workers, this could inspire workers to develop new trajectories in which they could reconcile their pride as workers with their desires as citizens.

The role of political parties and NGOs – listening to and multiplying the voices of workers

Citizens’ panels organised at the national and the EU level have developed progressive policies but have had a limited impact on formal politics. Structures are necessary to channel ideas and priorities from workers’ assemblies to influence the political sphere. However, the potential impacts are higher than in the case of non-union citizen’s panels since here workers develop suggestions for the transformation of their own workplaces for which they are experts. Political parties and NGOs, having listened and discussed with workers in their assemblies, could incorporate their suggestions into their politics and thereby strengthen the voices of rank-and-file workers and create a connection between workers’ expertise and institutionalised politics. The role of progressive parties in the European Parliament would be to work together with unions and NGOs to create workers’ assemblies at the European level composed of delegates from local and regional workers’ assemblies across Europe.

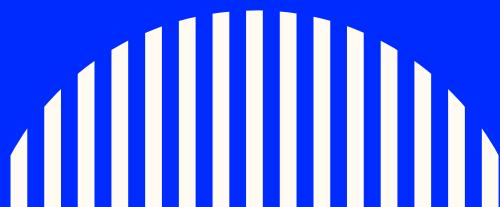
The role of the European Union – including workers as the experts of working life

The European Green Deal, though ambitious compared to similar policies in other continents, is based on the [refuted belief](#) that economic growth can be de-coupled from resource use. While it states that it wants “to leave no person and no place behind”, Trade Unions have [criticised](#) that there is no mandatory framework that protects the most vulnerable, no systematic structure that connects policies against climate change with policies against inequality, and that trade unions and workers are not involved in its [governance approaches](#).

The European Union has organised Citizen’s Panels to understand how citizens see the perspective of the EU. However, their suggestions have not found their way into the decision-making processes of European institutions. The European Union should provide resources to support unions in creating workers’ assemblies at the European level. They would need to include workers from all genders, ages, and qualifications, and from all

sectors. All working processes need to transform into ecologically viable ones, and all sectors are interrelated. For example, the service sector, agriculture, and care work are all dependent on industrial products and industrial processes are dependent on them.

The role of workers' assemblies at a European level would be to synthesise the suggestions developed on the ground and translate them into political proposals that would be taken into the European Parliament and the other EU institutions. Such central workers' assemblies would enable workers to learn from each other and from experts and to resolve conflicting views. They would develop suggestions created at local levels into comprehensive suggestions that connect with workers from other sectors and localities. Such processes will be conflictual at all levels. But it is through conflicts that learning can occur. Workers' assemblies would be a step forward to democratise workplaces, societies at large, and the European Union. Workers could connect their interests to produce useful things for people and planet with their interests for a life in which they can care for each other and for the nature they love and depend on.



Next steps...

Find out more

Further reading on Environmental Labour Studies:

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Räthzel, N. (2023). Society – Labour – Nature: the Potential of Conflict, Critical sustainability sciences: intercultural and emancipatory perspectives

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With this document, our aim is to position worker-led degrowth transitions on the political agenda.

Help us do so by sharing this summary within your network or by reaching out to us or the author to organize an event, an interview, or any other project.

Contact us !

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