



GREEN TRANSITION IN RETAIL: THE NEED FOR WORKER-LED PLANNING

July 2021

Background

Transition in British industry has not typically fared well for workers. Deindustrialisation, under successive governments from the 1980s, made no attempt to mitigate the impact of the destruction of industries and loss of jobs and livelihoods. We stand at the precipice of another process of upheaval, as high carbon industries and practices must change to take action to protect ourselves and our ecosystems from environmental catastrophe. The Grantham institute [have suggested](#) that around 10% of the UK workforce could require some upskilling or retraining for this zero carbon transition - no mean feat.

As evidence shows, if green transition is only led by corporations, the environmental initiatives taken are more likely to be [shallow and meaningless](#). This also brings risks on workers through potential unpaid additional responsibilities, workers bearing the costs of reskilling and potential cuts to wages to offset the costs of 'green' changes.

But industrial change doesn't have to spell bad news for workers. Worker-directed green transition can be 'just' - securing decent jobs and livelihoods and broadening demands to achieve wider social and economic improvements. This worker-led change has to be well planned and thought out - and the workers' movement does not have time to lose.

Many union activists and officers have spent the majority of the past year firefighting against job losses, workplace health risks and lack of adequate sick pay facing members during the Covid-19 pandemic - as well as the mental health impacts of the pandemic for workers. This has limited opportunities for proactive action on environmental issues. But these issues cannot be deprioritised.

Many across the workforce are oblivious to the imminent changes to working life which will come as a result of green transition. Whilst there is some tentative discussion in high-carbon industries such as manufacturing, in the retail sector this awareness is far more limited. I spoke to retail shop stewards, national officers and those leading just transition task forces in the union movement to get a

sense of the current landscape in the retail sector, and what could be done to move the debate on.

Barriers

The workers and union representatives interviewed for this research identified a host of barriers to the green transition in the retail sector. Addressing them will be vital in making any meaningful progress on worker led transitions.

I. Engagement

Several of the union officials and activists pointed to the fact that for many workers in the retail sector, their job is a secondary or even a tertiary form of income. One interviewee pointed out that many retail workers cannot afford union subscriptions, whilst others do not have good enough internet connection to attend branch meetings. A lack of engagement with the work itself inhibits engagement with the union that goes beyond providing support in a crisis, limiting the more proactive and political aspects of unions. As one national officer in the retail sector pointed out, workers tend to engage with the union based on their relationship with management or the company, rather than the substance of the work.

A lack of spare time for democratic workplace engagement for those working multiple jobs is compounded by the caring responsibilities of many workers in the sector - retail accounts for 14% of work for all jobs held by women, who [disproportionately bear the burden of care work](#). Anecdotally, this was confirmed by interviewees who attested that there are large numbers of working mothers in the sector.

The high levels of alienation from the work in the sector might also preclude consideration of whether or not it is 'green' - even if workers are engaged in environmental issues elsewhere in their lives.

Another issue comes with the size of unions which represent workers across multiple sectors. This can make disseminating information across the entire membership very challenging - due to the sheer number of members, many of whom might not engage with digital communications.

There are further barriers at the national level in unions, beyond engagement of workers: one interviewee pointed out the disparities in engagement on green transition across different unions, with some unions particularly reticent. This will have an uneven impact on the retail workforce, with those unionised under less engaged unions being at a disadvantage for forward planning on matters such as green skills. It's therefore important that different unions work to get on the same page.

II. Corporate greenwashing

The lack of union-directed 'greening' practices leaves workplaces vulnerable to green initiatives directed by companies - with companies reaping the rewards of greenwashing, whilst passing on any associated costs to the workers. 'Greening' practices are often not communicated to workers, despite affecting their day to day roles.

The insincere nature of corporate social responsibility was highlighted several times. One union organiser pointed to Amazon spending money on adverts showing they have brought an electric van into their operations, whilst spending an equal amount of money purposefully preventing or disrupting union activity. One interviewee said that workers seemed unaware of the risks of company-led green initiatives to their pay, conditions and job security - and pointed out that the added factor of Brexit poses an even greater risk to workers in companies who might move their operations to the US, where there is no obligation to pay holiday pay.

III. Lack of unionisation

There is no 'listening ear' in government for unions at present, which can leave a demoralising landscape for political action.

Another issue is the fragmented nature of the workforce, particularly in the retail sector. One union officer I interviewed spoke of multiple contract agreements, localised contracts, and historical contracts with differing conditions to current contracts - making it difficult to find collective causes for strikes or other types of large-scale industrial action. If workers have different pay and conditions in their contracts, then one workers' issue might not be the same for another on a different contract. This lack of collective culture poses challenges for action on green transition, which is an overarching issue that demands cooperation beyond individual action. It also makes the work of organising across the whole sector very challenging. What's more, even with collective issues identified, many retail recognition agreements are purely representational: with no full bargaining rights and little actual power. This means the union is seen as a backup protection, rather than a power. The difficulty of leveraging power with such limited agreements leaves workers disappointed.

Moreover, it's difficult to retain membership in retail as it's a very transient sector. It is not likely to be people's first thought when they go into new jobs to renew their union membership. It is also very challenging to unionise young members, who are often unaware of what a union is following the decimation of unions in the 1980s and following: the young people entering the workforce now might not even have any older family members who were previously in unionised work, for

example. This recruitment issue is problematic since young people are often heavily engaged in environmental issues.

IV. Organising across supply chains

In many unions, retail is part of the food, drink and agriculture sector - illustrating that retail cannot be divorced from other parts of the supply chain. If green transition is to occur, this must necessarily be across the supply chain - a point made by an interviewee from Unite's Food, Drink and Agriculture sector. This brings with it challenging demands of organising internationally, with workers in other parts of the world, and across different sectors which play different roles within the supply chain.

V. Factionalism

The challenge of environmental catastrophe is unique in its enormity - it will not be solved in one workplace or sector, by one shop steward or union. Unions undercutting each other in the same sector is a risk to progressive action - and one which management exploits. Factionalism risks gains for workers - for instance, having more than one union present in the same workplace with no communication or collectivism between the two can lead to one union making separate deals with management and undermining industrial action - and potential gains - of the other. Factionalism weakens our ability to make any progressive political change both within and beyond the workplace.

Opportunities

I. New zero-carbon jobs

There is a huge **need** for a **new workforce** with the right skills to meet the demands of the care sector and the emerging low-carbon economy. This poses a challenge in terms of the skills gap, but also presents an opportunity to create new, unionised jobs with decent pay and conditions to rebuild the strength of the workers' movement, particularly amongst young people entering the workforce, who might not otherwise join a union. If unions lead reskilling efforts, this would carry the additional benefit of educating workers on the need to join a union, and raising their demands - and conditions - in the new zero-carbon sector.

II. The impact of the pandemic

Several people I spoke to pointed to the politicising impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, with ruthless behaviour from management in the midst of a health crisis, and the devastating effects of the drive for profit maximisation upon workers and communities. Almost everyone I spoke to reported increased militancy within the membership, and some uplift in density (though this was

offset by unemployment rising). The rise in density does seem to suggest that more people are recognising the importance of joining a union, however. One interviewee spoke of the terrible conditions in food manufacturing workplaces, with huge Covid outbreaks. Union action on this to protect workers' safety led to increased favourability amongst the membership.

Finally, the pandemic has shown that there is money available - revealing the myth of the 'magic money tree' narrative. More money should - and could - be demanded for investing in new jobs for those who have lost work; for those in precarious work; and for young workers entering the labour market.

III. Shorter working hours

Tasks within work becoming automated is often seen as a threat to jobs, with unions often firefighting against job losses. But a reduction in workload does not have to mean job losses - in fact it can mean a reduction in working hours across the workforce. In 2018, [the total number of days lost to work-related stress](#), anxiety and depression in the UK rose by three million to 15.4 million. Overwork is the [major reason](#) for sickness at work, with one in four of all sick days lost as a direct result of workload. What's more, [UK leisure time has not increased since the 1980s](#), despite some productivity growth. Shorter working hours carry positive [benefits for the environment](#) as well as for workers, enabling a more sustainable lifestyle: more free time allows workers to make environmentally positive choices; cycling and walking instead of driving, and cooking with fresh ingredients rather than buying energy-intensive ready meals. What's more, shorter working hours brings with it a reduced carbon footprint: [Research](#) has shown that a four-day week would reduce carbon emissions from electricity production by up to 24%.

IV. Equalities

Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, class-based prejudice and other forms of discrimination [persist](#) across the workforce. Union demands for a green transition which has positive impacts for workers should not be restricted to environmental concerns: by building union power, other issues of social and economic injustice can form part of our demands for a 'Just Transition.' Times of social and economic upheaval have carried with them a scope of demands for change historically - and they can again.

V. Cop 26

The upcoming COP 26 is an opportunity for unions to ensure that the voice and agenda of workers is at the forefront of discussions around climate change. One interviewee told me their sector is focused on organising fringe events around COP 26, focused on both worker organising. COP 26 provides a good chance for environmental groups and union activists to engage in mutual dialogue and skills

shares. What's more, the large-scale catering and hospitality provisions demanded by such a large-scale event raises questions about the pay and conditions of the workers involved - as well as the environmental impacts. COP 26 is a chance for unions to raise specific demands on standards for workers and the environment in catering and hospitality, linking workplace and environmental issues in a practical context.

Recommendations

I. Green reps training

Most interviewees said there was little to no awareness amongst the rank and file of how environmental issues linked to their jobs or working lives, or any sense that retail might have any harmful environmental practices. This is a risk as knowledge is power, and a lack of knowledge leaves workers vulnerable to management, and capital, setting the terms of the narrative around green transition. One example is the pervasive myth that green transition inevitably poses a risk rather than an opportunity to the workforce - something we can see in the manufacturing industry, where fighting job losses has outstripped, for example, demands for reskilling or an overall reduction in workload with no loss in pay.

Health and safety training is commonplace for shop stewards. Environmental training must also be prioritised. As one interviewee pointed out, this is 'pushing at an open door' for many employers, who do not know how to improve their environmental practices, or want to resource time to find this out. If unions lead this, it could be framed as a positive support to management, whilst ensuring that the needs of workers are met.

As one interviewee pointed out, it is essential to work out how regional and industrial strategy for green transition can be rolled out on the shop floor - it must be directed from the ground-up.

It is beyond the scope of this briefing to provide a detailed outline of the content of green reps training - but this work has started, [with a toolkit developed for the Welsh TUC](#). This work should be built upon and rolled out across the movement - alongside a resource pack to put things on workplace noticeboards, as one interviewee suggested.

One interviewee suggested a way to start the process of recognition for green reps could begin with workplaces with recognition agreements. This could involve an initial session run by the union at reps training to inform a short note and proposal to the company, followed by in-store study circles to generate new knowledge and action plans, with the ultimate goal of appointment training and recognition of, and facilities for, union Green reps. Another participant

emphasised the need to identify positive case studies of progress in green transition in specific workplaces to be used as a blueprint for elsewhere.

II. Worker-led planning

As several interviewees testified, green initiatives directed by companies often carry costs for workers.

As a response to this, participants stressed the need for unions to be proactive on environmental issues, rather than reactive, in order for workers to set the terms of change. This means unions setting a vision and agenda for what a 'just' green transition would look like for both workers and the planet. One interviewee argued that green planning must begin in the workplace, before moving onto bigger targets such as local government.

Workers are in the unique position of knowing their sectors and working practices in intricate detail - which means they are best equipped to advise on how to 'green' their working lives and make positive environmental change. As one interviewee pointed out, this could follow the historical example of The Lucas Plan, in which aerospace workers created an alternative plan for the future of their company, to redirect the skills of workers towards making 'socially good' products, for which demand remained, rather than sustain job losses as a result of the decline in demand for their existing manufactured goods. This is one of the most prominent examples of bottom-up, worker-led industrial strategy: representing workers leading the planning for how their industry could positively adapt and be repurposed to make it future proof, rather than being at the mercy of change and mitigating its worst effects.

A 'green Lucas Plan' is clearly needed. Harnessing workers' knowledge of the day to day details of their working practices could lead to substantial environmental improvements - but ensuring that these do not come at the cost of workers. For instance, more jobs or paid hours might need to be created as a result of extra environmental responsibilities - rather than these being added on by companies without remuneration. An extra hour spent ensuring all lights and machinery are turned off at closing time, for instance, must be remunerated accordingly. Worker-led environmental planning could identify skills gaps, and demand that companies or the government provide these, rather than workers having to foot the bill or face redundancy in favour of workers with these skills and lower pay and conditions, in a continuation of the 'fire and rehire' style tactics we've seen recently. Identifying where automation might be on the horizon, and making a strong case for this to mean a reduction in overall workload, rather than job losses, could also come as a result of worker-led planning.

Developing worker-led planning should be a standing item in sectoral meetings; regional meetings; branch meetings; and conferences, with specialist union

officials and leaders training and supporting the rest of the union in the process. Unions should be speaking to one another in this endeavour: the times in which the Lucas Plan created the most successful ideas was via a 'Combine' of multiple unions organising in the same sector. As one participant pointed out, workers should be leading proposals for the creation of millions of green jobs.

One interviewee spoke of Just Transition workshops beginning to take place in a number of large unions, and across all sectors. A practical element of these workshops - beyond spelling out the risks - is essential to keep morale up and engage the movement in securing its future and the livelihood of its members. Education departments are proactively working to roll out green training and widen understanding on green transition - this should be built upon.

III. Leading reskilling

As one interviewee said, apprenticeships and training, particularly for young people, is a 'rip off' when provided by the government - with low pay and being of poor quality. Moreover, it socialises workers into accepting workplaces with no union presence, where they must go 'above and beyond' their contract, and tolerate poor pay and conditions. Young workers and migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to this. Union-led training and reskilling could have the opposite effect: providing high standards in training, and ensuring workers go into unionised, well paid work. Unions could use this opportunity to increase their visibility.

Wider awareness-raising should come alongside union-led reskilling: one interviewee suggested that famous ambassadors could advocate for unions to raise awareness amongst young people. Another suggestion was that unions should be bolder, investing more in advertising and exposing salaries at top level and huge income disparities. This could function to get people engaged, tying these messages into the Green New Deal agenda. Such information should be short and shareable - and relating to people should be at the forefront of communication on green issues. Another suggestion on reskilling was that unions should incorporate this into agreements as it is an issue of collective bargaining.

Union-led training and reskilling has particular importance for retail, as a sector with a relatively young workforce - [more than half of retail jobs in London](#) are held by those aged 34 or under, for example. As a workforce with many years of employment in front of them, it is important that retail workers are given the types of skills and training which will enable them to progress and increase earnings over their lifetime.

Relational and communication skills from customer service would be invaluable in zero-carbon roles such as social care. These skills within retail are attributed

little value, however: retail is considered 'low skill' and is therefore poorly paid. Ensuring these workers receive training to develop their experience further could have a significant impact on their future earnings.

IV. Forging international and cross-sectoral links

As one interviewee pointed out, capital 'just does enough' to meet social and environmental standards, and compartmentalises issues to contain any risk to profit. Unions must not fall into this trap, but rise to the scale of the environmental challenge and risks to workers: addressing issues across the supply chain by forging links with workers and unions internationally. The upcoming COP 26 conference is an opportunity for these networks to begin to be formed, and must be taken advantage of.

Another option for wider union action comes with one comment that unions should be holding their own versions of G20 summit, pooling resources, money and plans for a fair, green future.

V. Role of companies

If companies want to be seen to be meeting standards of good conditions for their workforce, and adhering to commitments to make environmental improvements in their practices, they should create additional facilities time for reps to assess and make recommendations for how the workplace could be 'greened,' as protecting workers' interests would be at the forefront of such recommendations. As one interviewee pointed out, companies are often very hostile to unions, but they do take action where there is customer demand. As pressure mounts on companies to adhere to corporate social responsibility, unions should be seizing the narrative about how both 'green' and 'socially responsible' targets can be met.

One interviewee argued that there was value in engaging with companies, saying that unions putting their foot in the door working with managers would be a useful first stage from which to move to more radical demands. Nevertheless, as they pointed out, it is important for unions to recognise conflicts of interests with managers.

As one interviewee argued, companies should provide the conditions for workplace reps to develop the knowledge and skills to be green reps for their workplace, through releasing time for this. Companies could additionally support the rank and file by designating a day for members to learn about environmental issues in the workplace, led by unions, to widen skills and knowledge. The companies themselves would benefit from the knowledge, skills and specialist focus of green reps, as well as a clued-up workforce, when making environmental improvements. This could be used to enhance CSR ratings and impress

shareholders, and put pressure on other companies to do the same. It was also acknowledged by several participants, however, that in some cases recognition agreements are merely representative, giving little actual power or leverage to the union to force action from companies - and in many parts of the sector there is no recognition at all.

One interviewee emphasised that companies often agree to things then row back on agreements, or split the workforce by offering different conditions to different workers. This can only be tackled by union strength and collective power.

Contact

Emily Scurrah

Researcher

Emily.scurrah@neweconomics.org

Chaitanya Kumar

Head of environment and green transition

Chaitanya.kumar@neweconomics.org

This briefing and the accompanying blog was funded by generous support of the European Climate Foundation.