TRANSFORMATIVE TRADE UNIONISM AND LOW-CARBON FUTURES

Jacklyn Cock and Hilary Wainwright
Introduction

Spain in 2014 is not a natural starting point for looking for business success – let alone one of a green energy business set up by idealistic students seeking public investment during a time the austerity-driven government was cutting back on all renewable energy subsidies. Yet the renewable energy co-op Som Energia in Spain has not only survived, but it has flourished, expanding from 350 individual members in Girona in 2010, to 12,000 across Spain in 2013. The investment has allowed the co-op to build photovoltaic plants, a biomass installation, and has spread to more than 15 cities, servicing more than 22,000 homes. Moreover, the vision of the company is not just of better renewable energy options, but also of breaking an “energy oligopoly”, putting energy back under “citizen control” and ultimately building a more “social and solidarity-based economy”.

This energy success taps into a powerful social current, one of a renewed worker democracy, based on liberating the potential and productive capacities of working people and linking them with new movements of citizens. It is one example of many that this chapter explores, showing how ecological and economic restructuring, in which working people are at the heart of the solutions, will be essential in dealing with worsening climate-change impacts in a just and sustainable way. The restructuring needs to be in an anti-capitalist direction, because it is the expansionist logic of capitalism that is destroying the ecological conditions that sustain life, as well as producing increased misery, injustice and inequality throughout the world. As ecological breakdown accelerates, the dominant classes will survive at least in the short run, living in protected enclaves in what John Bellamy Foster calls a fortress world:

Fortress World is a planetary apartheid system, gated and maintained by force, in which the gap between global rich and global poor constantly widens and the differential access to environmental resources and amenities increases sharply. It consists of bubbles of privilege amidst oceans of misery.¹

This retreat into fortified enclaves is growing and already exists in many countries, as the powerful and the privileged move into the increasing number of gated communities and golf estates offering fortified security with a lifestyle of overconsumption. At the same time, outside these enclaves the ‘oceans’ of poverty and unemployment are spreading, and the repressive capacity of the state is increasing.

These trends are occurring as capitalism itself is in deep crisis. The latest survival plan is to put a price on our rivers, oceans and forests, commodifying and financialising nature to ensure continuing capitalist accumulation. The argument is that that only by putting an economic value on nature can we protect it in a capitalist economy; in practice it often fuels environmental destruction and is worsening the climate and environmental crisis.² This chapter argues that the linkage between the ecological and the economic crises must be worked on in an opposite direction: by struggling for a counter-dynamic of
social relationships based on respect for nature and the overriding priority of social need and human flourishing. Drawing on examples with a focus on South Africa, we argue for transnational networks of collaborative action driven by labour and environmental activists. Such solidarity networks are already spreading, becoming stronger and deeper. They are anti-capitalist in their values and their visions. They are broadening our notions of labour and of community organising, making new alliances and innovating in how we organise and how we produce and care for the public good. Collectively they amount to a transformative form of counter power at a critical moment in our history.

As labour and environmental organisations move beyond solidarities based on interests or identities, sociologist Richard Hyman suggests this could prompt these new networks to “reconceptualise solidarity in ways which compass the local, the national ... and the global ...”3 Growing consciousness of the consequences of climate change and increasing evidence of the threat it poses to human survival is already giving an impetus to such a process.

**New foundations: Rethinking labour**

The ecological and economic restructuring we need requires significant changes in how trade unions tend to be organised, including their relationship to the environment, to politics and the development and implementation of policy. Uzzell and Rathze note that “union movements across the world have been moving fast to incorporate a concern for nature by taking on climate change as an issue of trade union politics.”4 However, a post-productivist ‘transformative trade unionism’ will also require challenging the way trade unions have traditionally delegated policy making and implementation to partner Labour, Social Democratic or, in colonised countries, nationalist parties. Instead, it puts its confidence in workers, who have distinctive organisational and creative capacities and knowledge they use to enable themselves to be a creative driving force – agencies of policy creation and implementation – for restructuring the economy in an opposite direction to that currently promoted by capital.

Building more self-consciously on the idea of labour as the capacity to produce and create – which underpins not only capitalist development but historically the trade union movement, too – is key to providing resilience in the face of the combined economic and environmental crises. Thus any alliance between labour and environmentalists has to go to the base of the labour movement, the organisation of workers at the point of production, where workers’ skill and knowledge is exercised – and where this knowledge is also a source of power. The radical declarations that we have seen from some trade union leaders at both national and international levels will only have practical meaning if there is a change in the flow of energy in the trade unions, starting from the base.

Supporting this redirection of energy in trade unionism means first understanding the
changes taking place in work and their implications for how we think strategically about labour.

In a context where corporate capitalism and its political allies are destroying long-term contracts for the majority of workers in both private and public sectors, spreading in their place the plague of precarious work, any strategy focused exclusively around the fulcrum of waged labour, as it has traditionally been organised in the workplace, will be limited in its impact. Labour organisations will be weaker from the standpoint of transformative politics if they do not reach out to the new forms of self-organisation emerging amongst precarious workers and in communities. A good example here is the organisation of waste pickers – now an impressive international organisation – that has developed from organising for better rates and conditions to supporting co-ops of waste pickers to also taking responsibility for waste recycling.5 The impact of these informal-economy workers’ organisations will be stronger if unions, which have built up considerable infrastructure and material resources, became flexible and supportive allies.

Effective strategies also need to draw upon the rebellion against the commodification of labour, which from the late 1960s has in different forms broken down the traditional boundaries between consumption and production, community and work. This rebellion provides resources for the struggle to restructure the economy away from its present Promethean devouring of nature. South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) has historically been one such union, leading struggles against the privatisation for water in the years immediately after the end of apartheid and now fighting against the corruption and tendering that contributes to the lack of basic services to the poorest, neediest communities.6

In response to the African National Congress’s adoption of neoliberalism in the mid 1990s7 and to address the specific post-apartheid legacy, SAMWU and several Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) affiliates mobilised the skills and commitment of their members to develop a public capacity for restructuring public services without recourse to privatisation, to meet the needs of all. Their attempts at the democratic restructuring of access to water, especially, is an early example of an attempt at ecological and economic restructuring.8 SAMWU’s strategy also sought to build alliances with community organisations to increase its impact and drive a more transformational agenda.

In South Africa, the emergence of a post-productivist transformative unionism has a relatively strong base because, learning from their own struggle against apartheid, some of the leadership and activists of COSATU take seriously the need to ally with communities and social movements organising beyond the work place. But on every continent, trade unions have been part of alliances with community organisations, not only to defend against commodification but also to deepen democratic control of
public services. Uruguay, Columbia and Brazil provide especially strong examples of this transformative unionism, especially in defence of water as a public good. These public-sector experiences have been paralleled in the private manufacturing sector, such as by National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), as we will explore later. There is also an experience in the UK in the 1970s that reveals the potential of a socially conscious trade unionism. The experience is of shop stewards at the engineering company Lucas Aerospace, who deployed collective bargaining and industrial action to try to exert control over the purposes of production – and therefore the uses to which their labour is put. These kinds of strategies that move beyond a purely defensive trade unionism will be central to an effective strategy for environmental justice.

This emerging (and still precarious) ‘social movement unionism’ is putting a wedge in the relentless wheel of capital accumulation and, at the same time, exemplifying alternative, human-centred values on which production could be organised, if wider structural and political change is achieved.

**Climate Jobs campaign**

The labour movement in South Africa has traditionally neglected environmental issues in favour of jobs. However, this is changing. The One Million Climate Jobs campaign, launched by an alliance of labour, environmentalists and other social movements, challenges the false dichotomy that suggests a trade-off between jobs and the environment. As Kazis and Grossman write,

> Environmental protection not only creates jobs, it also saves jobs ... Forestry, tourism, agriculture and the growing leisure and outdoor recreation industries are all important sources of jobs which depend directly upon clear water, clean air, and wilderness for their continuation and growth.⁹

Globally, trade unions often express support for one of the promises of the green economy: green jobs – jobs dealing with environmental threats. And indeed shifting to a low-carbon economy could create a significant number of jobs. For instance, the Industrial Development Corporation and the Development Bank of South Africa argue that some 130,000 direct jobs could be created in SA’s renewable energy sector by 2025.¹⁰ They maintain that green jobs could grow to 462,000 in the long term.¹¹

However, trade unions, amongst others, are also increasingly recognising that what are claimed to be ‘green jobs’ can be just as exploitative in terms of low wages and bad working conditions as ‘brown jobs’, with the same tendency toward outsourcing and casualization – in no way changing existing relations of power and wealth that could be exacerbated by a ‘security-focused’ response to climate change.
For this reason, the Climate Jobs campaign links demands for both economic and ecological restructuring, connecting the economic and climate crises and demanding solutions that point in an anti-capitalist direction. Climate jobs are both an entry point into an alternative social order and a way of creating more-resilient communities in dealing with the immediate impacts of climate change. They recognise the linkages between mitigation (slowing) and adaptation (coping with) climate change, opening up a dynamic towards economic and ecological restructuring that is socially just and democratic.

South Africa’s One Million Climate Jobs campaign was inspired by a similar one in the UK. In 2009, workers at the Vestas wind turbine factory on the Isle of Wight occupied their factory threatened with closure. This brought climate campaigners and trade union activists together in defence of ‘climate jobs’. The occupation and nationwide campaign did not stop the closure of the factory, but the experience stimulated a wider campaign to unite workers and environmentalists. Several major unions joined the campaign and sponsored a campaign booklet, ‘One million jobs: Solving the economic and environmental crises’, presenting a detailed case for climate jobs.12

The campaign in South Africa was similarly organised around the shared belief in the urgent need to address the crises of both climate change and unemployment. South Africa’s unemployment rate is now 40 percent, if work seekers are included, and it includes millions of the country’s most vital resource: its young people. Almost three million people between the ages of 18 and 30 are neither in jobs nor at any educational institution.

The campaign also recognised that climate change is worsening many of South Africa’s environmental problems. For example, it threatens water supplies, already an extremely scarce resource in a semi-arid country; Crops already cannot be planted on more than 14 per cent of its national surface area. Currently around half of South Africa’s fresh water resources are devoted to commercial agriculture, which follows an unsustainable production model that uses massive quantities of toxic pesticides and herbicides, as well as requiring great inputs of harmful chemical fertilisers that seep into the watercourses and deplete the oxygen vital to many freshwater species. The government and mining corporations have allowed contamination from disused and abandoned mines to leach into fresh water supplies. Many tributaries of the Vaal River have been seriously contaminated by these discharges, as well as through pollution by heavy metals and radioactive substances.

The burden of all this falls most intensively on the poor, especially on poor black people, perpetuating an environmental racism and injustice that has not ended with the fall of apartheid.
The Climate Jobs campaign seeks to confront this reality on the basis of three principles: ecological sustainability, social justice and democratic state intervention. In terms of ecological sustainability, the Climate Jobs campaign proposes jobs that reduce our dependence on fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) but also change the way we all live, particularly the ways we produce and consume and the ways in which people and nature are exploited and abused. In terms of social justice, it means providing ‘decent jobs’, including safe and healthy working conditions, social protection and security as well as fair wages. In terms of the state, it calls for active state involvement. For example, some jobs could be directly created by the state through a Public Works Programme; others could be the outcome of state policies such as directing food retail companies to acquire a percentage of their fruit and vegetables from local suppliers.

The reality of energy poverty, experienced by almost a quarter of poor, black South African households, illustrates the importance of these principles. These households at present are denied access to electricity, either due to the lack of infrastructure or the imposition of unaffordable prepaid meters. They have to rely on dangerous paraffin stoves and candles, or the time-consuming collection of firewood. At the same time, 90 per cent of South Africa’s electricity is generated through burning coal, which means that it is highly polluting. Justice requires that all households have access to energy; sustainability demands that this should be clean, safe, affordable and renewable energy. To ensure the provision of these social needs, the production of such energy should involve public ownership and democratic control – in other words be wholly or partly socially owned, whether through the state alone or some combination of state support and provision through the solidarity or cooperative economy.

The Climate Jobs campaign in South Africa engaged in an extensive research process showing how investing in renewable energy would both reduce carbon emissions and create millions of new jobs. The research showed that 50 per cent of all electricity from clean, renewable resources is possible by 2030, and this could provide over a million new jobs.

The campaign also identified other climate jobs, such as the design, manufacture and installation of equipment for water harvesting; developing the infrastructure for public transport – particularly the expansion of rail freight – to shift our addiction to owning our own cars; the construction of low-cost housing, using local materials and retrofitting existing structures; as well as many interventions in managing natural resources to meet human and ecological needs, such as control of invasive alien plants and the restoration of wetlands.

Perhaps the most potential for climate jobs lies in the shift away from the corporate-controlled industrial food system to agroecology. This necessarily involves the reduction or elimination of fossil-fuel-based chemical fertilizers and often involves a
form of localization, which brings producers and consumers closer together. It is being increasingly pursued in many countries as a way of reducing the carbon emissions involved in ‘food miles’. Shifting from corporate-controlled industrial capital-intensive agriculture to labour-intensive low-carbon agroecology could also protect soil and water, provide healthy food and create millions of jobs. The potential lies both in mitigation and in the adaptation necessary to guarantee food sovereignty as climate change worsens.

Research by the South Africa’s Climate Jobs campaign suggested that all these initiatives together could produce over three million new ‘climate jobs’. The evidence was published in the form of a popular booklet, which forms the basis of a coordinated campaign in which trade union representatives play a central role. This kind of shared, collective learning and cross-union, community/social-movement organising is deepening mutual trust, support and commitment – in short, the social relations of solidarity.

While the focus is on immediate demands and actions, the campaign also recognises that the crises of unemployment and climate change are rooted in structural inequalities that require radical political action. As Zwelinzima Vavi, the General Secretary of COSATU, argued at a global gathering of trade unions in Madrid in 2011, “[W]e will not support any form of capital accumulation that breeds inequalities – even if those forms of capital accumulation are ‘green’.” The structural inequalities Vavi refers to can only be overcome, the Climate Jobs report argues, through building the economic and social power to own and democratically control natural resources and the means of production. Such a strategy has no single or fixed institutional model. Rather it is organised around a plurality of forms of democratic economic organisation, according to purpose and possibility. For example, for some purposes, such as the national railway network, democratic state ownership with worker and user participation might be most appropriate. For the production of renewable energy, however, a network of community-based cooperatives feeding into a national grid might be most appropriate, given the regional and local variations in energy resources.

A distinctive approach of the campaign is to try to prefigure, in the process of campaigning, solutions to problems of environmental justice. In this way, not only can it build up support and confidence in environmentally sustainable alternatives, but activists can also experiment, learn and build up the capacity to implement these alternatives in the process. South Africa’s Climate Jobs campaign therefore not only poses a challenge to the unjust distribution of power and resources in the world that have caused climate change, it also shows in practice the alternative solutions that are possible today to avert climate crisis.
Two labour visions of a ‘just’ transition

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), South Africa’s largest and most powerful trade union federation, endorsed the Climate Jobs campaign, advocating what it called a ‘just transition’ to a low-carbon economy, using renewable energy instead of coal and affirming that its success will depend on workers’ skills, knowledge and commitment to change.

COSATU explained the idea of a just transition like this:

The evidence suggests that the transition to a low-carbon economy will potentially create more jobs than it will lose. But we have to campaign for protection and support for workers whose jobs or livelihoods might be threatened by the transition. If we do not do that, then these workers will resist the transition. We also have to ensure that the development of new green industries does not become an excuse for lowering wages and social benefits. New environmentally-friendly jobs provide an opportunity to redress many of the gender imbalances in employment and skills. The combination of these interventions is what we mean by a just transition.16

COSATU says that a just transition will therefore require not only investment in environmentally friendly decent jobs, but also the expansion of comprehensive social protections (pensions, unemployment insurance, etc.), research into the impacts of climate change on employment and livelihoods in order to better inform social policies, and “skills development and retraining for workers to ensure that they can be part of the new low-carbon development model”. At an international level, COSATU has demanded more-radical action against climate change, rejected market mechanisms to deal with climate change and called for more-active state involvement to ramp up public investment, defend human rights to energy and clean water. It has also called on industrialised countries to pay their climate debt.17

Nevertheless, the content of such a just transition is still contested by some of COSATU’s affiliated unions. Two broad approaches to this notion of a ‘just transition’ may be identified. The first, a minimalist position, emphasises limited change involving green jobs, social protection, retraining and consultation. Its emphasis is defensive, focusing on protecting the interest of those workers most directly affected, e.g., by a move from fossil fuel. The second argues for transformative change: an alternative growth path and a conception of labour politics that challenges the overriding imperative of increasing production and maximising consumption. This would involve both mitigation and adaptation as it would slow down, if not reverse, the processes of climate change as well as build resilience to its potentially devastating impacts on South Africa’s food, water and general security.
Two COSATU affiliates, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), illustrate these two contrasting understandings of how to address climate change. NUM’s approach is primarily defensive, with an emphasis on new technologies such as carbon capture and storage. The response of NUMSA, one of the biggest unions, representing almost 300,000 workers in energy-intensive industries, is starkly different, grounded in its commitment to socialism. It is sceptical of the ‘just transition’ approach as “empty rhetoric” and embraces the need for a more deep-rooted change in South Africa’s political economy.

According to Dinga Skwebu, NUMSA’s education officer, who is the official leading NUMSA’s work on climate change,

The talk about a just transition is often shallow because it does not talk about who will own the new energy sources. They must not be sites of capital accumulation. The same culprits who destroyed the environment are now the proponents of renewable energy. We prefer to talk about a managed transition. We are inspired by the slogan, “Socialism is the future, build it now”. This is what informs our transformative notion of a just transition. The insistence on public ownership and democratic control is a building block for socialism.18

NUMSA is working to put this idea of ‘building socialism now’ into practice in its day-to-day bargaining strategies in industries directly affected by climate change. In 2011, NUMSA established a worker-led Research and Development Group on renewable energies (and also on energy efficiency). This includes, amongst others, workers from factories that produce the new renewable-energy infrastructure – solar panels, solar water heaters and small wind turbines.19 These groups are investigating the carbon emissions of various products and then working with groups in the community that use them. The aim is to build an evaluation of these products in relation to carbon emissions into their negotiating strategy, including proposals on design and investment.

Underpinning NUMSA’s initiatives for Climate Jobs is a long tradition of workers’ control, a principle on which the union was founded. In NUMSA’s thinking and practice, the idea of workers’ control applies at three related levels: Building the organisational strength in the workplace to exert control over management decisions, not only on wages and working conditions but also over the purpose of production and the nature of investment decisions; extending this principle to a vision of democratic control over the economy and presumably the state; and a commitment to workers’ – the union’s members – having control over the union itself, its direction and its day-to-day organisation. NUMSA’s serious commitment to workers’ control and the pivotal role its workers play in the energy-based economy points to the potential of the union playing a key role in South Africa’s conversion to a low-carbon economy. NUMSA has set itself an ambitious agenda and is really only just beginning.
This example of a radical trade union whose bargaining strategies in the present are explicitly guided by a long-term vision in which labour contributes to a common good will remind some readers of the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards in late-1970s UK and their “alternative corporate plan for socially useful production”. This initiative, a response by engineering shop stewards from across the company’s factories and from every level of skill or trade – involving local communities too, as well as dissident scientists and technologists from academia – became a beacon of a new kind of trade unionism. It dramatically exemplified the potential of trade unions to organise the knowledge and skill of their members and back it with their industrial bargaining power, in order to deploy this capacity to meet social needs.

For the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards, the aim was to convert the company’s capacity, including their own skills and time, from manufacturing missiles to making ‘socially useful products’: for example, ecological vehicles integrating road and rail transport, machinery for energy conservation and equipment for the disabled. As Mike Cooley, one of these shop stewards and a leading design engineer, put it:

> We have levels of technological sophistication such that we can guide a missile to another continent with an accuracy of a few metres, yet the blind and disabled stagger around our cities in very much the same way as they did in medieval times ... we have vast nuclear power industries, huge conventional power-generating system, complex distribution networks and piped natural gas, yet pensioners die of hypothermia because they cannot get a simple effective heater.

The Lucas Aerospace experience of attempted conversion, even though it was 40 years ago, is very relevant to NUMSA’s current ambitions, because in both cases it is the technologists and engineers on whom the existing system of military (and fossil-fuel-based) production depends who are organising and preparing to turn the power arising from this dependence into a source of power for transformation.

The defeat of the Lucas Aerospace experiment is also salutary, as it was due to the widely popular campaign not receiving the government support that it needed. The vivid memory produced by such a practical and imaginative initiative, however, has not faded. Many of those, including trade unions internationally who now want to see a restructuring towards a low carbon economy on the basis of democratic control over production, draw on it as an example of how their vision could guide exemplary action now.

In South Africa, the battle of ideas is still beginning. Some COSATU affiliates – especially in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – clearly feel threatened by job losses related to climate-change policies. It is also unclear how much priority will be given to
climate change in the context of the many issues the labour movement in South Africa is addressing – issues such as tendering, labour brokers, casualisation, corruption, the living wage campaign and so on. The discourse around climate change can too often become extremely technical and specialised, which means that the priority given to climate change on the South African labour movement agenda is still tenuous, but nevertheless still growing.

Building solidarity as transformative power

There is a further lesson for the building of counter power from these experiences of climate-change activism: Their efforts to achieve such structural change point to the need to understand and confront the tremendous power of the transnational corporations driving neoliberal globalisation and their capacity to adapt and appropriate changing conditions in their endless efforts to expand profits. In The Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein has demonstrated their propensity to do so, particularly in times of crisis.

The increasing interconnection among these transnational corporations represents a form of ‘globalisation from above’. The strategy emerging from different components of the global-justice movement, broadly understood, is a complex process of building counter power: a ‘globalisation from below’.

This process is not only about building associational power in civil society; it also involves rethinking relations with the state as a resource for social change. The best way to summarise our argument is to distinguish between two radically distinct meanings of power: power as transformative capacity on one hand, and power as domination, involving an asymmetry between those with power and those over whom power is exercised, on the other.

We could say that historically, traditional mass parties of the Left have been built around a benevolent version of the second understanding. Their strategies have been based around winning the power to govern and using it paternalistically to meet what they identify as the needs of the people. We have seen the problems with this model in both the UK and South Africa, where total faith has been placed in the efficacy of exclusively representative, governmental politics. Social and trade union movements play supporting and subordinate roles rather than being actors with autonomous and necessary sources of transformative power. Since the late 1960s and 1970s, however, a different model has, albeit unevenly, emerged, driven by movements rooted in a transformational power in society. These movements tend to attempt to change the state from being a means of domination and exclusion to becoming a resource for transformation.

This kind of relationship between transformative movements and supportive governments is exemplified by experiences, albeit fraught with tension and ambivalence,
in Latin America. In Bolivia and Ecuador, governments have taken action to defend natural commons from capitalist speculation, guided by the knowledge and moral and political power of both landless and indigenous people's movements. The power relationship in both these countries between government and indigenous people remains asymmetrical, and indigenous populations still face problems accessing national and international mechanisms to defend their rights. Nevertheless, as a result of popular mobilisation, the Bolivian and Ecuadorian governments took important steps to recognise the cultural and territorial rights of indigenous people – in the case of Bolivia this has included a constitution based on the notion of a ‘pluri-national state’ – and by asserting public control over the extractive industries.

Such measures, however, have not necessarily meant that the Bolivian and Ecuadorian governments are sustaining their sympathy for the demands of all indigenous people – particularly when it comes to those challenging extractive industries and development projects, as the communities in TIPNIS, Bolivia (Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park), have discovered in opposing a planned road, and the communities of Yasuni in Ecuador found when opposing oil extraction in their region. Evidence of these difficulties is clear in the way the government of Ecuador reversed its early decision to reject oil extraction in the Yasuni area, responding to indigenous opposition with state indifference and repression.

There are lessons to be learnt, therefore, both from the achievements of these originally social movement-based governments and from the problems and intense conflicts that have developed. Conflicts and tensions are endemic to attempts to build alliances between governments – who face many ruthlessly hostile forces – and grassroots social movements rightly mistrustful of and frustrated with governments who do not reflect their concerns and needs.

In general, the building of transformative capacity requires first that we reemphasise and redefine in our present conditions the core value of the labour movement – solidarity or ‘associational power’ – the power that results from the collective organisation of working people. Transformative power emerges when those forms of solidarity or association become the basis for moves to overcome oppression or exploitation. This involves struggling against individualism and what Michael Leibowitz calls “the infection of self-interest” promoted by marketised social relations. But it also involves a relational understanding of collectivity, and with it a social understanding of the individual. Here the transformative impetus of environmental and labour alliances can gain insights from socialist feminism, with its understandings of the interaction between self-change and structural change. The liberation of women is in part about creating the structural social conditions for individual autonomy and self-realisation that in turn requires collective struggle and political action.
Similar understandings can feed into transformative initiatives around consumption. In response to corporate and elite-led processes of commodification, in which everything has a price, new environmental and labour alliances can create – and indeed are already creating – networks of mutuality and sharing, effectively meeting a wide range of needs outside of the capitalist market and using social media to achieve maximum impact. Care for the environment is often built into these networks.

An interesting example is the ‘Solidarity for All’ network that has grown in Greece in response to the extreme poverty caused by the austerity policies imposed by the Troika of the European Commission, IMF, and European Central Bank. Greece’s environmentally-conscious solidarity network consists of initiatives across the food chain, from farm to communal kitchen, to cooperative shops and household ‘green bag’ delivery. Though the impetus was solidarity with those facing poverty combined with resistance to austerity economics, the process of organising food production and distribution on the basis of social need and democratic economics awakened a consciousness and interest in sustainable agriculture. This has led, for example, to farmers running schools on organic agriculture and trialling new forms of distribution, such as ‘green bag’ delivery, in order to provide good-quality food at low prices without wholesale middlemen.

Indeed, as well as solidarity in the face of austerity, it is often anger at the waste and recklessness of rampant consumerism and a search for authenticity and humanity against the rule of money that is motivating people of all ages in this direction, especially in the North. It is also one aspect of a widespread response to unemployment, low-waged jobs and general precariousness that face today’s job seekers.

Building solidarity, whether in production, community, consumption or in other spheres, needs to happen at two levels: first strengthening social relations of trust, reciprocity and cooperation – relations that energise and inspire – within our own movements, through participation in protest and resistance; and second in establishing alliances with other social movements. The move away from thinking about the ‘environment’ as something lifeless and external to recognising our ecological interdependence could also promote such new forms of collective action.

To become transformative movements also means extending and deepening our collective understanding of how corporate power operates. Many progressive social movements tend to focus on single issues and targets. We need to expose the complex and intricate workings of a cannibalistic system and demonstrate – not simply assert – how these issues are linked and embedded in contemporary capitalism. Too often there is an intellectual timidity that avoids naming the source of social and environmental injustice.
Towards a transformative trade unionism: The uneven emergence of labour-environmental alliances

In South Africa, one organisation in the climate justice movement illustrates the embryonic emergence of transnational alliances between two groupings that have not usually cooperated – the labour and environmental movements.

The environmental justice organisation, Earthlife Africa, is not only a key node in these movements, it is both locally grounded and globally connected. It thus transcends the primary emphasis on localism, which is a common weakness in ecology movements.24 For example, Earthlife’s Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Project (SECCP), in partnership with Groundwork, a nonprofit environmental justice organisation, mobilised global opposition to the World Bank’s lending to build more coal-fired power stations. It demonstrated that the proposed $3.75 billion loan to Eskom would increase the price of electricity for poor people and worsen South Africa’s contribution to CO₂ emissions and climate change. An Earthlife-Groundwork briefing document was produced, and within three months more than 200 organisations across the world critiqued the loan.

Earthlife SECCP assisted the World Bank Inspection Panel in a tour of areas surrounding Medupi power station and helped to bring together a coalition of workers, residents, traditional leaders and farmers to oppose the development. SECCP argued that “this loan is not about poor people or jobs or even the climate”, but instead was about benefiting vested interests.25 They were accused by Public Enterprises Minister Barbara Hogan of being “unpatriotic”.26 While the campaign failed to block the loan, according to Earthlife policy officer Tristan Taylor, “the campaign showed that environmental groups in South Africa have the international and domestic reach to seriously interfere with government plans”. It also helped galvanise broader international campaigning against the World Bank and international funding of coal-fired power plants that eventually forced the World Bank in June 2013, then the US Treasury (October 2013) and more recently the Netherlands (March 2014) to announce an end to funding coal-fired power abroad.

A recent campaign against electricity price increases also shows how an integrated and systematic approach can build new alliances and open up arguments for transformative change. In 2013, the parastatal Eskom requested a 16 per cent increase in yearly electricity tariffs for the next five years, to help fund its coal-based power station projects, Medupi and Kusile, and other capital spending projects. NUMSA, FAWU and SACCAWU, as well as Earthlife, denounced the move saying, "Proposed increases will pose an economic and social disaster for South Africa, as the hikes will lead to job losses, factory closures, and general increases in the cost of consumer goods."27 However, they also used the moment to push for a more systematic debate around energy democracy, advancing COSATU’s policy demand that all South Africans have the right to clean, safe and affordable energy.
The groups submitted proposals to advance in this direction to the National Energy Regulator of SA (NERSA). NUMSA played a key role, supporting community protests against price increases while using its bargaining power to influence the procurement of solar water heaters and strongly advocating for a socially owned renewable energy sector.

Sean Sweeney of the Global Labor Institute describes energy democracy as:

[B]uilt around three broad objectives namely the need to resist the agenda of the fossil fuel corporations, the need to reclaim to the public sphere parts of the energy economy that have been privatized or marketized and the need to restructure the global energy system in order to massively scale up renewable energy and other safe low-carbon options, implement energy conservation, and ensure job-creation and true sustainability.28

One lesson from the resistance in South Africa to electricity price increases is the importance of relating work on climate change to issues of immediate concern to working people. To some, climate change is somewhat abstract and remote or overly complex. For others, the framing of the issue in apocalyptic terms has led to a retreat from political engagement. Many of these issues are extremely complex and need translation into the everyday experience of working people.

The COSATU-NALEDI Reference Group, established in 2010, seeks to do exactly this: making climate concerns relevant to daily reality. The group meets monthly and includes representatives of all 22 COSATU affiliates and representatives from the environmental justice movement. It carries out research, for example, on the impact of climate change policies in various sectors of the economy, and it regularly holds educational workshops for workers on immediate issues, such as the impact of climate change on food prices.

Engaging with a concrete and immediate issue such as food helps demonstrate how the existing global food regime is unjust, unsustainable and unsafe. The global food system involves tightly controlled and globally integrated supply chains, dominated by large transnational corporations. Seeking to transform it will require engaging workers. After all, workers can be found throughout these transport and communication chains, giving them ‘logistical power’ that could disrupt or create pressure for change.29 Similarly, analyses of the waste, carbon intensity and exploitation in these chains, published in accessible forms, could draw in activists from a range of other movements whose concerns interconnect with these issues – such as the peace movement. Ultimately, food has the capacity to engage everyone as consumers. The fact that more than 33 countries witnessed food riots related to food prices increases of 83 per cent in the three-year period up to 2008 – and given that the control of food is going to become even more critical as a result of climate change impacts [see Chapter 8 ] – makes the necessity of new broad alliances for food justice and food sovereignty even more imperative.
A systematic critique

The challenge is first to demonstrate that all of these issues are deeply embedded in the capitalist system, second to point to the powerful evidence of alternatives, in the case of food the system of agroecology and food sovereignty, and third to create platforms through which diverse sources of social transformation can connect and converge, creating through their diversity a powerful anti-capitalist force.

No serious observer now denies the severity of the environmental crisis, but it is still not widely recognised as a crisis that cannot be resolved within the framework of capitalism.\textsuperscript{30} Naomi Klein’s recent book This Changes Everything is a great exposé of how capitalism has been the principal cause behind our collective failure to tackle climate change. As David Harvey argues, “an ethical, non-exploitative and socially just capitalism that redounds to the benefit of all is impossible. It contradicts the very nature of what capital is”.\textsuperscript{31} Based on this understanding, we also need to realise why capitalism will not be able to justly respond to the crises created by growing climate impacts.

There is a growing anti-capitalist sentiment to build on. Indeed it has roots in the very beginning of the modern environmental movement. Ever since the publication of Silent Spring in 1962, a significant part of the environmental movement has believed that the underlying problem was the drive for profits. In explaining “how intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind”, Carson says, “we live in an era dominated by industry in which the right to make a dollar at whatever the cost is seldom challenged.”\textsuperscript{32}

The problem has been the weakness of forces building on these early insights. These weaknesses stemmed initially, in Carson’s day, from deeply and institutionally embedded notions of limitless progress in which all science and technology was understood as ‘value neutral’. Hence, while critiques of capitalism were widespread in the late 1950s and 1960s, only in the past 30 years or so have they seriously begun to be combined with an awareness of the damage done to the environment by the way technology and science were developed under capitalism – and assiduously imitated by the Soviet Union.

The aim then of restructuring the economy in a way that overcomes the instrumental or commodified relations under capitalism, which shape how we relate to nature, is therefore closely connected with the possibility of envisaging new ecological alternatives to capitalism. The traditions of socialism, especially those that spring from mutualism and cooperation, seeing the state as a necessary servant, enabler, platform and resource – not as the central instrument of change – provide a fruitful guide for this task. It is the right moment for this task because
... climate change – when its full economic and moral implications are understood – is the most powerful weapon progressives have ever had in the fight for equality and social justice ... it is a message spoken in the language of fires, floods, storms and droughts – telling us that we need an entirely new economic model, one based on justice and sustainability.33

The solidarity economy: Reinventing socialism in an era of climate and economic crisis

A process of developing an alternative to capitalism and a more resilient and just structure for adapting to climate change will involve many opinions, much argument and most important of all, constant experiment. There are no blueprints and no fully working models. But there are principles we can agree upon that should inform these alternative visions: principles such as participatory democracy, ecological sustainability and social justice. There are also concrete experiences of alternative social forms worldwide. These include cooperatives of many sorts, especially inter-linked or federated cooperatives that often emerge as practical solutions to crisis and closure; experiences of democratising the delivery and management of public services outside of the commodity economy and a wide range of experiences of managing various kinds of commons, including now the digital commons.

The importance of experimentation also points to the importance of reflection and systematisation along the way, self-critically examining experiences and struggles that have sought to rethink our global economy at a time of climate change. And here we mean not only the struggles reflected on in this chapter, but also those which for instance which came together at the Cochabamba Peoples Summit on Climate Change and Mother Earth Rights in April 2010.34 As David Harvey puts it:

While nothing is certain, it could be that where we are now is only the beginning of a prolonged shake-out in which the question of grand and far-reaching alternatives will gradually bubble up to the surface in one part of the world or another.35

The bubbling up of alternatives can have many modest sources. Certainly the research and work on climate jobs described in this chapter has been an abundant spring. Although the work is just beginning, they suggest that a transition to a just and sustainable low-carbon economy could also contain the embryo of a renewed socialism – a democratic eco-socialism based on these values and policies:

- The collective, democratic control of production, production for social needs rather than profit
- Decentralised energy, operated in the public interest with much greater potential for democratic community control.
- Energy-efficient and affordable housing
- Localisation of food production and investment in agroecology and supporting food sovereignty
- Reduction of consumption, simplifying middle-class lifestyles, with reduced waste, extravagance and ostentation and a more appreciative use of natural resources
- Major shift to public transport – reducing reliance on private motor cars as symbols of power and freedom
- Greater sharing of resources, inspiring more collective social forms that break the individualism which has marked neoliberal capitalism and builds on the peer-to-peer ways of producing and consuming
- Promotion of cooperatives and solidarity-based enterprises
- Spreading of values of sharing, simplicity, solidarity, more-mindful living and a more direct sense of connection to nature.

These are some of the values that inform what a growing number of people are calling the ‘solidarity economy’. This has to be built ‘from below’ through grassroots mobilisation. It is an open, experimental process of political construction and struggle, rather than a fixed blueprint.

This kind of thinking – whether termed democratic eco-socialism or the ‘solidarity economy’ – could take labour beyond the real-world historical options of green capitalism, “where economic growth is de-linked from emissions and environmental destruction generally, or …. a ‘suicide capitalism’ scenario where fossil-fuel corporations and major industry, agriculture, transport and retail interests are successful in maintaining business as usual.”

Creating a new kind of socialism will mean building on the three principles of ecological sustainability, social justice and state intervention that define ‘climate jobs’ in the South African campaign. But it will also involve some important rethinking of both dominant capitalist ideas as well as traditional socialist thinking.

The first thing it will need to involve is a rethinking the link between socialism and production. The dominant conception of socialism in the 20th century tended to stress the development of productive forces. It was assumed that “by getting to a certain level of production you solve the problems of poverty and inequality”. This has been proved wrong. The new socialism emphasises the development of human beings. It means workers’ control and democratic participatory forms of production rather than the bureaucratic authoritarianism that was the pattern of Soviet rule. This means the social ownership of production, which is critical because it is the only way to ensure that production is directed to human development and the satisfaction of social needs. Social production means production organised by workers and is not the same as state ownership.
The second necessity will be rethinking how we consume. Under capitalism we are not human beings but consumers. Capitalism cannot survive without an infinite process of incentivising people to buy more and more commodities. “The shopping mall and the supermarket are temples of consumerism through which global corporations seduce us into participating in the destruction of our productive capacities, our ecological rights and our responsibility as earth citizens.”

In envisaging alternative relations between production and consumption, we need to distinguish between markets, which can be based on many different social arrangements, and the particularities of the capitalist market with its oligopolistic power over consumers, workers and nature, its opacity (such as the proportion of price that goes to profits and its failure to reflect true social and environmental costs of commodities, for example) and its separation of producers and consumers. Markets per se can be framed and organised in ways that are transparent and consistent with social forms of ownership and relations of mutuality between consumers and producers, and ways of living in harmony with nature. In theory and in practice we are beginning to see more and more experiments in socialised markets that create the conditions for what Kate Soper calls “alternative hedonism”. Soper argues, like us, that we need to rethink how we live and consume in the light of impending environmental catastrophe. The original element in her thought is that alternative ways of living can be more enjoyable than consumerism. This leads to her notion of alternative hedonism. This compares well with the notion of ‘living well’ (or buen vivir) advocated by indigenous movements and some states in Latin America that, in contrast with aspiring to ‘live better’, seeks well-being based on harmony with people and nature.

The third necessity will be a rethinking of our relationship to nature. Marx recognised how capitalism was destroying nature. He wrote, “Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations.”

Marx also wrote, “Man is part of nature”, and we have to recognise our place in a broad, ecological community, in which we are all connected and interdependent. The old type of ‘productivist socialism’ exploited nature carelessly and ignored ‘planetary boundaries’ or the limits of natural resources. This is why we have to explicitly break with the Promethean, instrumental approach of historically existing socialism and in its place advocate eco-socialism.

Eco-socialism recognises that the present mode of production and consumption by advanced capitalist countries is not sustainable as it “is based on the logic of boundless accumulation (of capital, profits and commodities), waste of resources, ostentatious consumption, and the accelerated destruction of the environment, [that] cannot in any way be extended to
the whole planet”.41 It defends clean air and water and fertile soil, as well as universal access to chemical-free food and renewable, non-polluting energy sources as basic human rights.

As well as integrating an ecological vision, ecosocialism also advocates different social relations – the development of solidarity and caring relations rather than the competitive and possessive individualism of capitalism that atomizes and divides us. This vision draws much from the indigenous Andean paradigm of ‘living well’. It also means a different view of human nature – we are not born selfish, greedy and competitive; these are qualities we learn under capitalism. It is a much more optimistic view of human beings, with collaborative action as the agency of change. Capitalism as a system thrives on the cultivation and celebration of the worst aspects of human behaviour – selfishness and self-interest, greed and competition. Socialism celebrates sharing and solidarity.

Justice and what Eric Olin Wright calls “human flourishing” can only be realised in a democratic eco-socialist order that changes the present patterns of production and consumption and focuses on the provision of basic human needs. Enacting this vision, though, challenges the “deepest shadow that hangs over us [which] is neither terror, environmental collapse, nor global recession. It is the internalized fatalism that holds there is no possible alternative to capital’s world order”.42 This does not mean there is an absolute, fixed blueprint for a socialist alternative. The key is having an openness to rethink, using key principles to provide a compass but ultimately constructing the alternative with full democratic participation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has drawn on material from South Africa, which could serve as pointers on how to construct counter-power in a time of climate crisis. This political geography is not coincidental or a matter simply of our personal involvement with the country. The peoples of South Africa are especially politicised, having been engaged in a life and death struggle for change, whose political legacy is now being destroyed by corruption, compromise and the destruction of democratic movements seeking to realise the true potential of the revolution against apartheid.

In the South African context and elsewhere, the ecological crisis, particularly climate change, combined with the economic crisis, especially the growing numbers of jobless, is leading to new political spaces and an impetus to globalise local resistance.

South Africa provides an important lesson: To address climate change adequately and ensure human survival as its impacts worsen, we need both ecological and economic restructuring, and this will require new alliances between labour and environmental movements.
Bringing these forces together poses complex challenges; it is not a matter of the massed ranks of two assembled movements joining forces. Trade unions, for example, are vital to the ecological anti-capitalist struggle, but we have also seen that they have to change considerably to realise that potential. In particular they need to put more emphasis on and resources towards support for grassroots involvement in ecological alternatives and local alliances with community groups. They need to be prepared to broaden their conventional focus on wage bargaining to become involved in the purpose, use and context of work, especially as it concerns the environment and the natural commons. Trade unions also have much to learn from the environmental justice movement’s insights into the commodification and financialisation of nature that are deepening social and environmental justice, as well as the evidence they present that capitalism (even dressed up as ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’) cannot accommodate the ecological changes necessary for human survival.

Similarly environmentalists have to move away from a sometimes-narrow and even misanthropic preoccupation with protecting biodiversity and relate environmental concerns to the day-to-day reality for workers facing increasing precarity and citizens facing growing economic and social insecurity and deepening injustice.

If these green-red alliances were organised nationally and transnationally in a way that seriously integrates the creativity of their participants and encourages combined action and reflection, they could also develop an inspiring vision rooted in and nourishing their transformative power. This could generate a transnational solidarity movement able to “connect particular local struggles, generalize them and link them to a universal project of socio-ecological transformation, against the universalization of neoliberalism and capitalist markets as the regulators of nature and society.” Our aim must be a new kind of globalisation from below – a transnational solidarity that offers alternatives to the mass of working or would-be working people, deepening their involvement and building their power.
Notes
13 Climate jobs in renewable energy, public transport, and agroecology, for example, are distinguished from green jobs, which are usually defined as any jobs related to the environment. These jobs do not necessarily have anything to do with cutting greenhouse gas emissions or building the resilience of communities to withstand
the effects of climate change. With green jobs there is also a strong tendency by business to use the lure of ‘green jobs’ to greenwash their polluting ways. One million climate jobs - Tackling the environmental and economic crises [Pamphlet].

This challenge to green capitalism is shared by the South African labour movement more broadly. For example, a document endorsed by COSATU, NACTU and FEDUSA, ‘Labour’s initial response to the national climate change response green paper 2010’ states that “we are convinced that any efforts to address the problems of Climate Change that does not fundamentally challenge the system of global capitalist is bound not only to fail, but to generate new, larger and more dangerous threats to human beings and our planet ... Tackling Greenhouse gas emissions is not just a technical or technological problem. It requires a fundamental economic and social transformation to substantially change patterns of production and consumption.”


COSATU policy framework on climate change.


Tristan Taylor, Earthlife policy officer [Interview]. Johannesburg. (2010, July 10)


This chapter is part of the book, *The Secure and the Dispossessed – How the Military and Corporations are Shaping a Climate-changed World* (TNI/Pluto Press, November 2015). The book exposes the dangers of a new climate security agenda in which the powerful respond to the climate crisis with military and corporate solutions. But it also shares the stories and practices of communities worldwide building the inspiring alternatives that promise a just transition to a climate-changed world.

‘If you want to understand why we can’t leave it to the Pentagon and corporations to shape our response to climate change, then you need to read this book.’

– Naomi Klein, author of *This Changes Everything* and *The Shock Doctrine*

‘Will we respond to the climate crisis with the politics of fear and business as usual – and in so doing condemn millions? Or will we wrest power from the corporations and the military in order to develop the radical just solutions we need?’

– Pablo Solon, Former Ambassador to Bolivia and lead climate negotiator to the UN

[www.climatesecurityagenda.org](http://www.climatesecurityagenda.org)