

INTERVIEW

UK GREENER JOBS ALLIANCE AND A JUST TRANSITION



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Samantha Mason is a policy officer at the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union in the UK covering climate change and the environment as it impacts workers, as well as digitalisation/automation and trade issues. She is the main author of the PCS pamphlet “[Just Transition and Energy Democracy: a civil service perspective](#)”. She represents the union on the Greener Jobs Alliance Steering Committee, and is a UK collaborator on the Adapting Canadian Workplaces project. She also represents the union at the Trade Union Congress (TUC) Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (TUSDAC), and works closely with the global Trade Unions for Energy Democracy initiative.

Q1. Could you please present us the Greener Jobs Alliance? What are its missions and governance?

The Greener Jobs Alliance (GJA) was formed in 2009 as a partnership body inclusive of trade unions, student organisations, campaign groups and a policy think tank. It organises on the issue of jobs and the skills needed to transition to a low carbon economy. It produces a monthly newsletter and training tools designed to raise awareness of sustainability issues in the workplace. These can be found on the web site:

<http://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/>

A Steering Committee is elected at the Annual General Meeting, and who act as the governance body for the GJA throughout the year. Their work is guided by the strategy and work-plan agreed by the AGM. It also works in alliance with other groups on joint initiatives such as the Trade Union Clean Air Network campaigning for health and environmental concerns of workers particularly linked to poor air quality.

Since its formation, the discussion on low carbon transition has moved on a great deal and now firmly rooted in the Just Transition debate – what that means and how practically it is achieved.

Q2. What are the skills needed in a low carbon transition? How are they acquired? Are there private and/or public programs/schemes?

Whilst there is an obvious focus on energy transition and energy intensive industries, given the scale and pace of decarbonisation needed to meet targets in line with the latest science provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we take the view that a whole economy approach is needed to address the challenge. This means looking at every aspect of the economy from transport, construction, agriculture, manufacturing, education to the need for a strong public sector.

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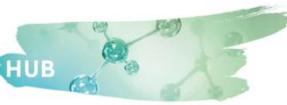
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There have been many studies detailing the transition from fossil fuel energy jobs to renewables. Many of the skills are comparable but would require retraining/reskilling programs. What we may call jobs that need repurposing for a different energy technology. For example, a report for the Scottish Green Party in 2015 – “Jobs in Scotland’s New Economy” sets out a clear comparison with jobs and skillsets in offshore oil and gas with offshore wind renewable energy infrastructure. This includes engineers, machine operatives, helicopter pilots, surveyors, welders as well as those with Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) skills.

What is more interesting perhaps is the lack of current skilled offshore workers with mariner skills, including masters, chief officers, crane drivers, navigator, electrical engineers and riggers. Other sectors of the economy require a revision of skills and training such as in construction and retrofit.

Current training programs in the UK, give little if any attention to low carbon construction methods, including linking with wider building trades. This compares differently to Germany where apprenticeship schemes are more focused on skills needed in a low carbon economy, and therefore supported by a strong national program.

There are therefore tensions in how the transition and skills needs can be met. Private sector employers are only likely to

invest if it meets their business needs rather than broader social and ecological goals. But government also has to link policy aims, such a building retrofit, with other economic and policy support such as through training programmes and supporting workers into new jobs.

Q3. How can we accompany “smoothly” sectors that must be phased out, for instance coal or offshore oil drilling?

The global trade union movement have long argued for the concept of a Just Transition to be included in national economic plans. This was incorporated into the preamble of the Paris Climate agreement in 2015, and backed up by the Silesia declaration at the last COP.

We are clear that workers and communities should not pay the price of transition and ensure that they are protected in terms of their livelihoods (social protections) and future job prospects (retraining/skills). Equally that workers are consulted in processes of transition.

However we are also conscious that transition plans should also consider the impact on local communities and opportunities for future workers. Therefore national and regional governments need to consider wider economic diversification strategies as part of this. Likewise, that transition should be part of addressing other structural inequalities in the economy such as around gender, race, pay and pensions, as well as worker representation.

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Q4. What are the countries that have engaged interesting programs?

In Spain, trade unions and the National Federation of Coal Mining Businesses (Carbunion) have reached a phase out agreement with €250 million to be invested in mining communities. This will support business and clean energy initiatives in mining regions over the next five year (2019-2023), offers early retirement for miners over 48, retraining for green jobs, and funding for environmental restoration.

By contrast, Canada is in the process of phasing out its coal power production by 2030. This isn't therefore directly targeting thermal coal, but more a closure of the mines by default once their associated plants stop consuming coal. A national transition taskforce has estimated the impact on workers, and provincial governments are in the process of implementing or announcing targeted transition programs. For example, Alberta's Bridge to Re-employment program provides for additional employment insurance and tuition fees. It is also supported by a \$5 million Coal Community Transition Funds.

These are good initiatives but have their limitations if emphasis is only put on early retirement or reactive labour market policies rather than looking at economic diversification policies.

Q5. Can you share example of re-trainings at plant/facilities level, for instance switch coal to biomass at coal power plant) or other schemes (early retirement provision ?

In reality there are few, if any concrete examples of companies that have instigated transition plans, although they are looking for investment in low carbon technologies. Arguably the best model to date is in the Yorkshire and Humber region , which has the highest carbon footprint in the UK and

foundation industries; steel, cement and chemical workers, manufacturers and heavy energy users in brewing and food manufacturing.

Here the regional Trade Union Congress has set up a Low Carbon Task Force to bring together key partners to help develop a regional low carbon transition plan. This includes trade unions, business, Local Enterprise Partnerships and environmental groups. A region that has already been heavily impacted by previous industrial decline, many skills have been lost and there is a real need for a coordinated industrial strategy for a low carbon economy.

Whilst companies can, and indeed will, make their own plans to fit their business interests, at the end of the day we believe that meeting the imperatives of the science of climate change and the targets of the Paris accords, will require national level coordination, with proactive employment and economic restructuring policies which puts works and their communities at the forefront.

The discarding of workers and communities in the industrial restructurings such as we saw in the 1980's and 1990's, particularly in the UK from coal to gas and manufacturing to a FIRE based economy, is recent enough in the memory for most workers. A 'green industrial revolution' offers an opportunity to rebalance the price workers paid then, ensuring new good, jobs, in a decarbonised economy that will ensure a future for everyone.

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