



## Jobs in a green economy: trade union perspectives

**A recent study** has analysed trade unions' understanding of the relationship between environmental protection and jobs. It identified four reoccurring themes from interviews with union representatives, which provide insight into how trade union environmental agendas could develop under a greener economy.

**Trade unions** are becoming increasingly involved with environmental issues, often driven by concerns that green policies may affect workers. For example, they may be concerned that an increased focus on reduced consumption could reduce production jobs, or that the push towards greener technologies requires many workers to acquire new skills and change occupation.

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 35 trade union officials from Spain, Sweden, the UK, Brazil, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, as well as with officials from international unions with European head offices. They questioned them on how they respond to the need to protect jobs and the need to protect the environment. The interviewees were all high level representatives responsible for environmental issues in their union. Although their views may therefore be untypical among their fellow union members, they are worthy of analysis as the interviewees were all influential figures who develop their union's strategy. The researchers identified reoccurring key concepts, or 'discourses', from these interviews that illustrate how the unionists perceive the relationship between jobs and the environment, with an emphasis on the climate change agenda. Four discourses were identified:

1. **'Technological Fix'**. This belief assumes that environmental protection poses no threat to workers, as green innovation will create new jobs, and that a low-carbon economy can be achieved *through* economic growth. This is conceived of as economic growth that meets the twin goals of protecting industry through modernisation and protecting the environment through reduced emissions. The researchers comment that this discourse fails to acknowledge social aspects of work, such as the effects of a new occupation on personal identity (see below), or the possibility that increased technological efficiency can reduce demand for labour.
2. **'Social Transformation'**. This perspective suggests that environmental change and social change need to go hand in hand. Interviewees with this view emphasised the close links between occupation and personal identity, for example, there are strong social distinctions between manual and office work, and feminine and masculine roles and a change in occupation can threaten this sense of identity. The researchers suggest that this needs to be considered in 'green job' retraining programmes, which need to present work as empowering and worthwhile to be successful. Labelling chemical or coal industries as 'dirty', for example, could alienate workers in these sectors from climate change efforts by challenging their sense of identity and pride in work.
3. **'Mutual Interests'**. This is the argument that unionists should engage fully in dialogue with workers and develop a joint vision that supports workers' immediate interests. These interests could be used to develop 'win-win' policies that reduce any perceived conflict between job protection and environmental protection. For example, one transport workers' union encourages lorry driving members to spend less time on the road, to allow more freight to be transported by rail or boat (while ensuring that it is always transported by lorry for at least some of the distance), which means the drivers can enjoy more time with family, while also enabling a more sustainable transport system.
4. **'General Interests'**. This perspective believes that environmental initiatives should tie in with broader societal concerns, such as health and safety, or even democracy. It conceives of unions as social movements, who not only protect their workers, but also the living and working conditions of society at large, i.e. unions can play a role in improving human wellbeing through a healthier environment.

While all the unions had an environmental officer, the perspectives varied depending on the sector and workers, for example, an industrial union which produces new technologies naturally took the 'technological fix' view, and public transport members of the transport union were more supportive of climate policies than lorry driving members. However, the study suggests that the discourses are not mutually exclusive and they all imply a re-emergence of trade unions as important social movements.

**Source:** Rätzl, N. and Uzzell, D. (2011) Trade unions and climate change: the jobs versus environment dilemma. *Global Environmental Change*. 21(4):1215-1223.

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**Theme(s):** Sustainable business, Sustainable development and policy analysis

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To cite this article/service: ["Science for Environment Policy"](#): European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.