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Climate action via just transitions across the island of Ireland: labour, land and the low carbon transition

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Abstract

Like climate action itself, it is fair to say the ‘just transition’ debate is in its infancy in Ireland within public and policy discourse around addressing climate breakdown, the ecological/biodiversity crisis and the transition to a low carbon, green economy. This chapter critically analyses policy proposals that safe, secure and well-paid green jobs can only be maintained by strong unions, and that bargaining power through unionisation is a vital component to achieving a just transition from ‘actually existing unsustainability’. It explores examples of ‘unjust transition’ in the Republic and Northern Ireland and the importance in both jurisdictions of an explicit focus on a ‘just transition for agriculture’. While the idea of a just transition most often applies to workers in the energy sector, in Ireland, the greatest source of greenhouse gas emissions is the agricultural sector. The chapter also discusses the evolution of trades’ union engagement with both climate and energy decarbonisation and broader environmental politics across the island, noting that a ‘post-carbon’ just transition also raises challenges for unions embracing a ‘post-growth’ objective.

Keywords: climate action, just transition, trades unions

Introduction

In 2019 the parliaments in Dublin and London declared ‘Climate and Ecological Emergencies’, as did cities such as Belfast, Dublin and Leeds along with other councils on the island of Ireland from Newry, Mourne and Down to Wicklow. And in January 2020 Belfast established the island of Ireland’s first Climate Commission. What are we to make of these Declarations and official Commission? On the one hand these declarations are to be welcomed as belated acceptance of the most recent climate science which has stressed the scale and urgency of reducing greenhouse emissions. In July 2017 the Republic of Ireland passed a law to ban onshore fracking. However, just days later, one of Ireland’s most prominent oil and gas exploration companies, Providence Resources, was granted a license to drill, in search of an estimated five billion barrels of oil. A year later the Irish government committed to divest from fossil fuel corporations, the first country in the world to do so. It appears that Ireland’s work on climate change is a matter of double-speak – with Government taking positive steps, while allowing privatised carbon-heavy industries to undermine them.

The Just Transition Debate on the island of Ireland

Like climate action itself, it is fair to say the ‘just transition’ debate is likewise uneven within public and policy discourse around climate, ecological and energy transition. On the one hand we can see both the Irish state and trades union movement signing up to (if not completely implementing or understanding) the ‘Silesia Declaration’ (announced at COP 23) and the relatively under-acknowledged or used inclusion of ‘Just Transition’ in the Preamble of the Paris 2015 Agreement. On the other, we can note the establishment of the Just Transition Commissioner in November 2019, and the Green Party proposal of a ‘Just Transition Commission (Worker and Environmental Rights) Bill’ (mimicking the already established Scottish Just Transition Commission) to oversee the implementation of the EU’s new Governance of the Energy Union package and Ireland’s National Energy and Climate Plan – ensuring that climate action is taken in a manner that is just and fair to workers, local communities and farmers. Such developments could improve the chances of a Just Transition enabling workers and communities and not just corporations to benefit from the green energy transition. And it could also extend a just worker and community-based energy transition to include ‘energy democracy’ and the democratisation of the ownership and control of renewable energy sources.

On the other, media discussions of climate action and energy transitions are dominated by scientific and technological framings, often with little or no consideration to the social and justice impacts of policy choices. Hence a benefit of community-based energy transition approaches in Ireland – North and South – is overcoming one of the main obstacles to scaling up renewable energy sources (particularly wind energy): local opposition and lack of social acceptance. State-backed provision for community and/or state-owned energy would go a long way in overcoming that opposition and lay down the parameters for more inclusive and equitable climate and energy action. This would also address the issue of the dominant energy transition strategy being pursued by both jurisdictions on the island, namely a market-based, neoliberal one. That is, a vision of the low-carbon transition that prioritises and assumes private, corporate ownership of renewable energy production, and a heavy focus on ‘competitive energy markets’. Thus, a key element of any effective just transition therefore is the ‘return of the state’ as it were as a coordinating body to ‘steer and manage’ any low carbon energy transition.

As a recent Irish EPA report on the low carbon energy transition in Ireland put it, “governing transitions specifically relates to how to most effectively use the agency of the state and other institutions to steer sociotechnical transformation in desirable directions” (Ellis et al, 2019; 24-25). But beyond that ‘functional’ role of the state, without state involvement non-technical issues such as equity and justice are unlikely to figure. Thus, while the transition to a low carbon future is inevitable (and we can see movements, uneven as they are, both globally and nationally moving in this direction), whether that transition is just is not. Here we can point to at least two aspects of a just transition: on the one hand, if we can see significant socio-economic and other injustices and inequalities within the current economic-energy order, how would simply ‘greening/decarbonising business as usual’ address

those structural injustices? On the other, and this is where the ‘just transition’ discourse connects to other emerging strategic frames and political economy policy platforms, such as the ‘green new deal’, surely we should use the transformative potentials of decarbonising the energy system to at the same time create a different political economy and economy *beyond carbon and beyond capitalism*? These are the big question raised by a just transition approach to climate action.

The just transition perspective holds that safe, secure and well-paid green jobs can only be maintained by strong unions, and that bargaining power through unionisation is a vital component to achieving those ends. Environmentalists point to 100,000 new jobs in the low-carbon sector, but talk and evidence is insufficient, and we sadly have examples, outlined below, of ‘unjust transitions’ on the island of Ireland. And further than that, there is the beginnings of a trade union climate and energy discourse around energy as a public good, something that should be thought of a *right* and not a *commodity*. Here some unions link anti-privatization campaigns such as the ‘Right2Water’ mobilization which took place across Ireland in 2016, to the low-carbon energy transition. IMPACT trade union stresses the issue of the ownership, control and governance of renewable energy, seeing in a Just Transition the “opportunity to give citizens a greater stake in low-carbon development through much greater levels of local authority and community ownership of future solar PV, wind farm, biomass and waste-to-energy developments” (IMPACT, 2017: 6). But, as outlined below, key here is the role of the state in regulating private energy actors to ensure just and not simply low carbon energy outcomes, and within the context of the neoliberal character and recent history of the state in both jurisdictions, the struggle for a just transition is centrally around a struggle for the role of the state in managing and coordinating any low carbon energy transition.

A salient point here is that unlike other countries, Ireland, while heavily dependent on imported carbon energy, does not have a large carbon extraction and processing industry. However, it does have many workers in the carbon energy and electricity production sector, much of which is heavily unionised. For Ireland, North and South, as outlined below, the agricultural sector is the equivalent of the carbon energy extraction sector in other European countries such as Spain and Germany, given the agricultural sector’s economic importance and contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. It is also an industry that does not provide a liveable income for most farmers. The decarbonisation of agriculture and how this sector can be transformed to reduce its GHG emissions is still a major ‘missing piece’ from the dominant discourse of a ‘Just Transition’ in terms of a new industrial revolution. Not least in how government plans for the expansion of the sector (the Food Wise 2025 plan) run completely counter to its climate change commitments.

Another, as yet unacknowledged benefit of a greater *indigenisation* of the just transition concept, is the integration of the Northern Ireland peace process within localised understandings of how a just transition should be implemented. The peace process, imperfect as it is, does have lessons around

conflict management and transformation that should be useful in activism and strategy around Just Transitions. This is because any transition, even a just one, will produce ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ and will face opposition and inertia from dominant interests. Hence conflict is inevitable and it is better to prepare for it than be taken by surprise. Hence the suggestion of activists for a low-carbon Just Transition learning and amending some of the lessons from conflict transformation processes such as the one in Northern Ireland. Here the trade union movement’s call for widespread worker and community involvement in the ‘social dialogue’ around the content of any energy or sustainability transition could benefit from the experience of the Northern Ireland peace process. And this could be, alongside the island’s abundant renewable energy sources, the island of Ireland’s distinctive contribution to the global debate and localised struggles for a Just Transition.

Examples of Unjust Energy Transitions

Energy transitions are medium term (sometimes decades) long processes that need to be strategically managed, mapped and (ideally) based on clarity, inclusiveness, openness and transparency. The shift from one energy system to another is not as simple as switching from one fuel or source to another. One has to include the associated infrastructure that is an integral element of any energy system, from the centralised power stations and long electricity lines, petrol stations that are part and parcel of the current fossil fuel energy system. As research on energy transitions demonstrates, the transition to a low carbon, renewable energy economy requires management by the state and a process of social dialogue with affected workers, unions, communities and other stakeholders. This is important not only for ensuring a ‘just transition’, but also for creating a shared vision amongst all the various energy actors, identifying the most effective policy mechanisms and finally for mapping the energy system as a whole, including those energy actors who might not be supportive of any transition to low carbon economy.

A just transition, a position on the transition to a low carbon endorsed by trades unions, environmentalists, faith communities and major energy actors and policy-makers, is about ensuring environmental sustainability as well as decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication. Most recently the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015 stated that “the imperative of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities”, was a non-negotiable element of the inevitable decarbonisation of societies.

The origins of ‘just transition’ are in trade union campaigns to protect workers and communities during the environmental and social damage of the industrial revolution, securing health and safety at work, freedom from disease such as ‘miner’s black lung’ and better living and environmental conditions for the working class. The phrase ‘just transition’ itself was coined in the US trade union movement by Tony Mazzocchi, leader of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers union who worked to bring trade unionists

into the “ban-the-bomb” peace movement, alongside a campaign to protect atomic workers in the transition to disarmament (Roessler 2016: 6).

While climate change (alongside energy security concerns) requires that we have to retire the fossil fuel energy system, this cannot happen overnight, and requires planning and long-term thinking, not short term market-based decisions solely or largely around costs. Mitigating measures need to put in place to ensure a smooth and a ‘just transition’ from a high to a low carbon economy. As the energy transition should not disproportionately negatively impact communities and workers dependent on oil, coal and gas energy production, and nor should consumers (especially those who are in energy poverty). It is clear that any transition to a low carbon economy requires that the fossil fuel energy system declines over time and then is replaced by a renewable energy system. However, we have examples of badly structured and managed energy transitions within both jurisdictions in Ireland, which does not bode well for inclusive and just energy transition and climate action. In Tullamore, Co Offaly we have the Bord na Móna decision to close a peat fired power plant, while in Kilroot, Co Antrim, we see the closure of a coal fired plant.

The decision to close two ESB peat-firing power stations – in Lanesboro, Co. Longford and in Shannonbridge, Co. Offaly – will have a devastating impact on the midlands and the workers, communities and others dependent on those stations for employment and livelihoods. As an Irish Congress of Trades Union report on the decision put it, “Unfortunately, what was also revealed in the wake of the announcement was the absence of a plan for a Just Transition with respect to the Bord na Móna workforce, and the glaring absence of such an overall national strategy that would help ensure that workers and local communities across the country are not simply abandoned to their fate” (ICTU, 2019: 5). The lack of consultation and meaningful engagement by Bord na Móna with local trades unions, workers and communities in this case can be viewed as an example of how *not* to organise a just transition – a situation that hopefully the state can ameliorate by moving towards the examples of the Ruhr Valley or the German Coal-Exit Commission. Not least in how the company failed to abide by either the Silesia declaration principles or the International Labor Organization guidelines which demand that any Just Transition policy framework should “anticipate impacts on employment, adequate and sustainable social protection for job losses and displacement, skills development and *social dialogue, including the effective exercise of the right to organise and bargain collectively*” (ILO, 2015: 6; emphasis added). What has happened with the closure of Kilroot power station near Larne in Co Antrim, is the premature retirement of a piece of the fossil (in this case coal) energy mix in NI, and likewise in the Bord na Móna case, without consultation with workers and other affected stakeholders or structural adjustment packages to assist in the building of a new green and indigenous industry with high quality jobs.

The Kilroot and Tullamore decisions throw into sharp relief the need to have longer-term plans for the transition of the island’s energy system and

economy. And this should be a political decision, led and coordinated by the state, with mandated democratic decision-making processes to include communities and workers, not simply left to market actors and processes. Energy and electricity in particular are strategic and vital resources to the economy and society that require political and long-term management. If not directly nationalising energy, a ‘just energy transition’ to a low carbon economy requires more direct democratic state ‘governance’ of that process, with a long-term transition plan to ensure people, communities and workers are not unfairly disadvantaged. If a transition away from coal, oil and gas means job losses, economic disadvantage and threats to the economic security of communities, with no mitigating measures and a transition plan for those communities in place, then people will not unreasonably be sceptical or outright resist such proposals. Both these cases could be said to make public support for low carbon energy transitions much more difficult. Rather than part of a managed and planned process of shifting out energy system away from fossil fuels, this decision may succeed in bolstering those (including within the trades union movement) who wish to continue our carbon based energy system and delay or dilute climate action.

A Just Transition for Agriculture

The concept of a just transition most often applies to workers in the energy sector. This is understandable: the move to a low-carbon future will most directly affect workers involved in the extraction and processing of fossil fuels. In Ireland, however, this situation is complicated by the fact that the greatest source of greenhouse gas emissions is the agricultural sector. This raises different questions and challenges for a just transition on the island of Ireland. GHG emissions from the agricultural sector account for over 30% of the total emissions in Ireland – the highest proportion from any agricultural sector in the European Union. This is due to Ireland’s concentration on dairy and, to a lesser extent, beef farming. These sectors are also the main pressure on water quality. The EPA’s most recent national report on water quality found that there has been a continuous decline in surface water quality since 2012 largely due to nutrient run-off from agriculture (EPA, 2019). As well as emissions and water quality, the agricultural sector is the main driver of habitat decline according the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). In a recent report (2019), they identified that agricultural practices are negatively impacting over 70% of terrestrial and coastal habitats.

Recent protests over beef prices, including a blockade of the city centre by incensed beef farmers, have surfaced the chronic problems around farm viability in a context of cheap food and inequitable global food supply chains. TASC’s recently published report on inequality in Ireland, highlights that the agricultural sector has the most severe inequality in income distribution of any sector in Ireland (TASC, 2019). Another, less discussed source of inequality is the still dominant culture of male-only primogeniture. A Macra na Feirme study in 2014 revealed that only 11% of farming successors (to farmers over 50 years) are female (Macra na Feirme 2014, 8). This has led to

Ireland having by far the EU's lowest number of women working in the agricultural sector – at only 11.6% out of 35.1% average across the EU-28 (Moran, 2018). This places women “on the perimeter of mainstream farming in Ireland” (Mulhall and Bogue 2013, 3) with negative results in terms of farm sustainability – environmental and socio-economic. Gender equality is necessary for a sustainable rural economy (Shortall & Byrne 2009; cited in Watson 2010); therefore, rural development and agricultural policies in a *just transition* require a holistic view of community wellbeing that incorporates a gender analysis.

While today's social, economic, (geo)political and environmental uncertainties are unprecedented, it is important to situate the current moment within the longer ‘transition’ that Irish agriculture has undergone over the past fifty years. If this history is ignored then there is a danger that the term ‘just transition’ will become another consensus buzzword, conditioned and applied in the same way as environmental initiatives and rural diversification schemes have been since the 1990s. There is a body of critical literature from rural sociology and geography that responded to the re-structuring of Irish agriculture and rural Ireland more generally in the crucial period of the 1980s/90s. The richness and value of such scholarship highlights the relative absence of such work in more recent years. By critically examining why efforts to resolve the structural contradictions of the Irish agricultural sector have failed, we can begin to see where energies and attentions need to be channelled in order to bring about more meaningful, and just, transitions within the sector.

Ireland and the EU: agricultural modernisation

In Ireland, entry into the EEC in 1973 opened new opportunities and avenues for farmers to expand their productivity, particularly in the dairy sector. As well as EU subsidies, technological developments (including major infrastructures such as networked water supplies and rural electrification), and latterly improved technical expertise relating to cattle breeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, combined to transform farming practices and rural landscapes. In 1988, Teagasc (the state-supported institute for agricultural research and extension) was set up to further improve efficiency on farms, shifting focus away from output and toward financial and business management. While Teagasc was nominally focussed on productivity and efficiency in 'the agricultural sector' as a whole, the need to raise national levels of output became a justification for concentrating programmes of aid for technological investment on the most ‘progressive’ farmers, who were also those with already the most resources (Tovey, 2000).

What took shape from the 1980s was a dualistic agricultural system in which one class of (dairy) farmers were encouraged to become more efficient enterprises, and another class of farmers were forced to diversify into other sectors, including the less profitable beef sector. As early as 1996, large specialist dairy farms had an average income of £58,000, while small farms in dry cattle production had an average income of £1,800 (Teagasc, 1997).

The main 'successful' policies, from the point of view of the majority of farmers who were small-scale, thus came from government departments that had nothing to do with agriculture, namely rural industrialization and social welfare policies. It is this process of stratification within the farming sector that has continued apace since the 1990s and which provides the context within which just transition debates needs to take place.

A just transition means an alternative food system

Since the 1980s, the production of milk has been subordinated to the needs of an expanding global food industry (Tovey, 1991). Dairy cooperatives, which has been consolidating since the 1960s, have also sought to respond to a situation of growing competitiveness in European and world markets that was greatly facilitated by era of free trade in agricultural commodities. Rather than food production, farming was being re-framed as the production of inputs for the food industry as dairy cooperatives moved into processing and the provision of ingredients to the food industry. All of which increased both the carbon energy intensity of the sector and increased its GHG emission profile.

Probably far more significant than employment potential, in terms of influencing state policy, are the opportunities for accumulation generated in the food industry, which are not available in farming (Tovey, 2001): in 1995, the cooperative food industry (primarily dairy processors) recorded a turnover of £6,000 million, compared to £20 million in 1970. Since the 1990s, the global expansion of the dairy processing cooperatives has only accelerated, with the opening of Chinese markets and diversification into niche ingredient supply chains. It could be argued that Ireland's 'agricultural' economy is more accurately part of Ireland's 'supply chain' economy, where processing, business management, finance, and marketing take precedence over food production, and where the profits accrue to these downstream activities. And yet, when responsibility is assigned for environmental problems related to the sector, it is farmers that are called out, not the CEO of Glanbia or the marketing director of Kerry Group on six figure salaries.

The continued rationalisation of agriculture in Ireland and across the EU has resulted in a trend towards "fewer farms, less farm employment, larger farm units and the specialisation and concentration of farm production" (Ní Laoire 2002, p.16). The commercialisation of Irish agriculture has also shifted social norms and institutions in Irish farming society, from "family farming" to "one-man-farms", mutual aid to isolation and marginalisation, and a lowering in the national status of farmers and values (Macken-Walsh, 2010). In 2011 70% of farms were non-commercially viable and survive only through the off-farm work of female spouses (Macken-Walsh 2010), leading Derwin to conclude that "in a peculiar sense, it is women's off-farm work that keeps farming male" (Shortall, 2006: 313).

The question of a just transition for the farming sector is part of a bigger set of questions relating to rural Ireland and the stalled or failed project of Irish 'agrarian modernity' (Tovey, 2001). Other directions were possible - Michael

Davitt's demands to socialise land, articulating Ireland's struggle against Landlordism as part of a global, anti-imperial struggle of indigenous, colonised peoples; the cooperative movement of the same era, which offered a different kind of agrarian modernity, one which sought to embrace opportunities of modern technology but through egalitarian control and ownership of these productive forces. These roads not taken can still provide inspiration, re-centring the need for a more egalitarian land ownership system - particularly the removal of the damaging culture of male-line primogeniture and the need to create a more cooperative farming system with younger family members while the landowner is living, rather than waiting for a will.

A just transition in Ireland has to think big and grasp the reality that cheap food will not last forever and cannot continue to be outsourced to other parts of the world. It is worth remembering that Storm Emma didn't just affect agricultural production here, it also exposed the fragility of Ireland's food supply chains – the images of empty food shelves may have been a novelty in 2018 but they should also be seen as a sign that the current global agri-food system is not sustainable and needs to be replaced with diverse alternatives that connect producers and consumers in more egalitarian and ecologically just relations. This means that a just transition for the sector needs to imagine an agricultural sector that can provide meaningful land-based work *and* safe, nutritious food through biodiverse, low-carbon farming. This means challenging the dominant discourse within EU and national policy that imagines 'surplus' farmers transitioning into providers of environmental or touristic services to urban dwellers. Linking just transition and the need for alternative food systems also challenges the media-fuelled narrative of rural versus urban Ireland, farmers versus environmentalists. Examples of these alternatives already exist and are growing (for example, the land-workers network Talmamh Beo in the Republic), the problem is that they remain marginal to the dominant model advanced by state policy and agencies. A just transition for the agricultural sector thus requires a well-funded Teagasc supporting and training young farmers in mixed farming and agro-ecology, rather than improving grass and milk yields.

Labour, the Environment and a Just Transition

SIPTU organiser for ESB and just transition campaigner, Adrian Kane has stated that "I think, if we are to be honest, like many others we have been late in the day in seriously engaging with climate change in the Trade Union Movement" (Kane 2018). This section presents the argument that an alternative and intersectional framing of what is considered 'environmentalism' in Ireland reveals that trade unions have a far longer history of involvement than presented, giving some hope for the just transition idea (with its origins in the trades union movement), to act as a coalition-builder between labour and the climate and ecological movement in Ireland. The call for a 'just transition' is not only a continuation of that trade union involvement, but also links to a human rights turn in climate/energy politics (see above on campaigns to view energy as a 'right' not a 'commodity'). It is also an expression of what has always been an Irish popular

environmentalism from ‘below’, prioritising the concerns of community organisations, rural identity, Irish trade unionism and farming against exploitation.

History of Irish Environmentalism in the South

Hilary Tovey (1993) and later, Liam Leonard (2007), trace the history of environmentalism in Ireland as a conflict between “a growth-based form of ecological modernization” driven by ‘official’ environmentalism, versus a grassroots localised ‘rural populism’, based around a reflexive construction of local rural identity which expanded as Ireland became more urbanised. ‘Official environmentalism’ is the dominant discourse of environmentalism in Ireland, historically preoccupied with the maintenance of “urban and rural ‘heritage’ in the form of visual amenities, historical residues and ecological complexes” (Tovey 1993, 413; Garavan 2007). Mainstream conservation and preservations strategies in Ireland tend to adopt a variant of Northern European environmentalism that sees environmental damage as “what have we done to ourselves” (Tovey 2007: 21).

Other environmental historians have criticised what they see as the Malthusian underpinnings of Northern European environmentalism which tends to promote a lens that an overpopulating and ignorant poor are the primary causes of environmental damage. This leads to the orientation of governance away from what is assumed to be an ignorant ‘collective’ towards ensuring the adoption of ‘vetted’ techniques and ways of seeing that prioritise a technocratic ‘expert class’ that can wield the language of state and corporate power and work within the policy making process. In climate campaigns this means a narrow focus on lobbying and legislation to ensure technocratic solutions are adopted in government policy, often market based solutions such as emissions trading schemes and carbon pricing (Doherty and Doyle 2013, 131 and 180). The 2019 Report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action, one of the most prominent and controversial recommendations of which was an increase in carbon taxation, could be viewed as an example of this ‘market-based’ and ‘technocratic’ climate action.

Despite the high media and public profile for national ‘official’ environmental organisations much of the actual environmental mobilisation that occurred from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s appears to have happened independently of national-level organisations (Tovey 1993). It was located particularly in rural areas of the country under threat from inappropriate forms of ‘development’ and ‘modernisation’. These localities could be said to be suffering from ‘ecological marginalisation’ and also (in the later cases of fracking and local opposition to wind energy developments) were self-perceived as ‘sacrifice zones’ for both carbon and renewable energy-based forms of industrialisation and modernisation. This rural and place specificity of localised opposition around energy transitions is important in understanding ‘unjust energy transitions’ such as the Bord na Móna case in the Irish midlands discussed briefly above.

The rapid growth of industrialisation in the wake of the Celtic Tiger boom brought benefits that largely bypassed rural areas, which became repositories for multinational investment in mining, chemical factories, industrial production processes and others. Opposition campaigns were launched by “local activist groups who did not see themselves as engaged in ‘environmental’ mobilisation and drew help and support from networks of ‘community’ or trade union activists in other locations” (Tovey 2007: 27). This dichotomy continued into the early 2000s as official environmental campaigns focused on European and global campaigns run by international NGOs on climate legislation, individual carbon footprints (Doherty and Doyle 2013, 180-2), as well as ‘climate justice’ which highlighted the low contribution to climate breakdown of people in the global South. Ironically, such campaigns occurred as local groups and trade unions fought in the Corrib conflict alongside the Nigerian Ogoni people against Shell, now known to be one of only 100 contributors to 81% of climate change and a major contributor to systemic climate denial.

An all-Ireland environmentalism – the just transition

A broader perspective of environmentalism then shows that the Irish trade union movement has not only been involved in environmental activism from its beginnings, but has a language and cosmology that shares elements with Irish popular (and rural) environmentalism. In her study of the Irish environmental movement, Tovey (2007: 21) notes that the trajectory of Irish environmentalism has more in common with the Global South and southern European environmentalism with experience of autocratic rule (Ibid, 25):

These local discourses of climate action or environmentalism are framed in terms of ‘the disorganisation of biological processes, the locals’ loss of their resource base, and the generation of a wide range of socio-economic, political and public health risks’ (Tovey, 2007: 26). This framing of postcolonial independence also operates in opposition to environmental regulation ‘from above’ – as locals in the South of Ireland rejected Dublin-based, EU or state regulations such as bog-cutting regulations created without their involvement as ‘neo-colonial governance’ (Scott 2012: 92)– echoes of which can be found in the Bord na Mona case above with rural communities feeling ‘left out, and left behind’ by decisions made in Dublin. Another example is the Irish water protests, defended in a framework of ‘polluter pays’ by official environmental groups as against a framing of anti-austerity, extractivism and a human right to water by predominately working class, trade union and rural campaigners.

While a history with its share of setbacks and controversies, generally trade unions in Ireland have worked with community groups from the beginning of their creation to similarly improve the health and welfare of workers and protection of their local environment. With this framing, a link can be made to Latin American environmental campaigns against ‘extractivism’ in Ireland. During the 1980s and 90s in South and Central America, neoliberal policies

re-focused development agendas towards extracting resources, in tandem with a rollback on worker's rights and public services, leading to high murder rates of land protectors and trade unionists. In fighting such extractivist policies, local groups work with other organisations facing oppression, including trade unions. Official climate campaigns in the Global North are slowly shifting from technocratic rhetoric of carbon footprints, pricing and trading towards the 'anti-extractivist' focus of their Northern Irish counterparts (Klein 2016, Stewart 2015). This is due to the influence of the disruptive rhetoric of indigenous and anti-racism groups, youth climate strikers, Extinction Rebellion, 350.org and the Carbon Majors report and court cases which focus on the corporate producers and sponsors of coordinated climate denialism campaigns, such as Exxon Mobil, or the Dutch Urgenda case. Such an analysis dovetails well with trade unionism, which historically has called for collective organising and state action in order to combat the exploitation of communities and the environment by powerful (often transnational) corporations.

Conclusion

As we move forward in the creation of national and international campaigns for climate action hopefully framed within a just transition, trade unions bring to the climate movement a valuable class and political understating and toolkit of collective class consciousness and organising against an exploitative system i.e. capitalism. However, trade unionism must be updated and move past growth-based productivism and its anthropocentric framing and add a 'post-carbon' agenda, as well as revive its more long-standing critique of capitalism. The integration of justice concerns for land and labour, for people and place is essential (if not easy to coordinate) for climate action and energy transitions in Ireland, if those actions are to be actively supported by citizens as both jurisdiction on the island of Ireland speed up their overdue transition to a low carbon and climate resilient economy and society.

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