

‘Not my task’: Role perceptions in a green transition among shop stewards in the Norwegian petroleum industry

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Abstract

In the petroleum-dependent Norwegian economy, climate change politics challenge the powerful petroleum industry, and Norwegian shop stewards in that industry find themselves in cross-pressures of representation and responsibility. In this article, we investigate what role trade unionists in the oil sector play and can play, in a green and just transition. We analyse data from six focus group interviews with shop stewards in the petroleum industry. By engaging with theories of roles and role perceptions in light of labour agency, we fill a theoretical gap in the conceptualization of workers' collective agency. Respondents describe themselves as active part of a green transition in their capacity as workers, but the role of shop stewards neither seem to offer tools nor a mandate for representing environmental concerns: Climate change is not their task. Shop stewards respond to externally ascribed role expectations by insisting that primary agency resides with politicians, companies and consumers—and union leaders. Their reactive and ambiguous role interpretation can prove risky, as the employment outlook in the industry is changing radically and rapidly. Last, we find that there are both a need and potential for re-scripting shop stewards' role that is active and relevant in the green transition.

Keywords

green transition, oil workers, role, role perception, shop stewards

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Introduction

The notion of a just transition signals different implications for different groups of workers. In petroleum-exporting Norway, the political debate around a green shift has long revolved around the future of the oil industry, while the economy's reliance on revenues from this sector continues unabated. Employers and trade unions in the oil industry have united around a single message: the sustainability of the country's welfare state, its 'high-road' labour market policies and a successful green transition all hinge on continued petroleum activity. Concurrently, an invigorated environmental movement has rewritten media narratives, redrawn electoral politics and even challenged the consensus of the broader labour movement (Houeland et al., 2021). In the middle of this contested political landscape is a group of actors who experience the cross-pressures of representation and responsibility (Murray et al., 2013): shop stewards in the petroleum industry.

This article investigates what role trade unionists in the oil sector play and can play, in a green transition. Our analysis draws on six focus groups with shop stewards conducted 2018–2019. In our conversations with these shop stewards, they discuss roles and role perceptions from different angles: how oil workers see their own role in a green and just transition, the potential for shop stewards and their unions to shape this transition, their reading of dominant media narratives and, finally, their expectations of other actors in society.

The case in question is of broader interest to the industrial relations literature as it contributes to an emergent, yet limited research agenda on climate change and employment relations (Goods, 2017). Specifically, it engages with the often overlooked workplace level in the Norwegian system of industrial relations (Dølvik and Steen, 2018). Thus, it examines the bottom-up potential of organised labour in a national context characterised by a high degree of social partnership combined with an economic reliance on extractive industries.

Theoretically, we argue that the conceptualization of workers' collective agency suffers from a weak understanding of roles and role perceptions. Our analytical framework is therefore informed by recent debates in sociology on how role perceptions mediate structure-agency relations (Archer, 2000; Kemp and Holmwood, 2012; Bie-Drivdal, 2021). We assess the relevance of these debates for studies of worker agency in industrial landscapes, for workplace dynamics and for industrial relations.

We outline the centrality of petroleum employment for economic development in Norway and discuss how roles and role perceptions can inform the academic literature on labour agency and its constraints before presenting a methodology incorporating this theoretical framework. We present the thematic analysis in four sections, the first two concerning how unionists see their role in a general transition and particularly in a green transition and the last two concerning their relations to others: the roles they see others ascribing to them and the roles they expect actors within and outside the industry to fill. We end with a concluding discussion.

Oil, industrial relations and the green transition in Norway

Norway has positioned itself as one of the global leaders in global climate politics (Eckersley, 2016), but its domestic petroleum policies create dilemmas and

contradictions. Although the risk of petroleum dependency has been debated since the discovery of oil in 1969, the industry remains extremely important to the state, the industry and workers. Nationally, revenue from petroleum contributes to about 14% of the gross national product and 14% of the state's revenue (Norwegian Petroleum, 2021). In addition to financing a relatively generous welfare state through taxation, direct income from the petroleum industry is channelled into the Government Pension Fund Global (colloquially known as 'the oil fund'), which now amounts to over US\$1 trillion (Norges Bank, 2021). Except for a yearly allocation of capital gains to the government budget (limited to 3% of the fund's value), the oil fund functions as savings for future generations.

Although the petroleum industry is capital and technology-intensive and creates relatively few jobs in offshore petroleum production, Norwegian governments have mounted a concerted effort to build a strong supply and downstream industry. As a result, petroleum-related jobs peaked in 2013 totalling 230,000 – a majority of which are in the supply industry. After the price falls in 2014, about 80,000 of these jobs were lost, but still counting over 5% of the workforce. Based on a scenario on current policies and future price estimation of US\$50, approximately 50,000 workers directly or indirectly employed in the petroleum industry are expected to lose their jobs (Norwegian Government, 2021). Needless to say, the need for a transition is acute, and the prospect of decommissioning the petroleum industry for the sake of climate mitigation challenges the interests of powerful policy actors.

The perceived inevitability of the green transition frames Norwegian industrial politics and scripts the roles of the industrial partners as they position themselves for change. The Norwegian industrial relations model 'is generally thought of as the pinnacle of the welfare state, a reason why Norway is not severely hit by crises, [and] is highly adaptable' (Bergene and Hansen, 2016, p. 5). Admittedly, the robustness of the Norwegian model, with wage coordination, counter-cyclical state interventions and welfare state cushioning, also rests on the large petroleum incomes (Dølvik and Oldervoll, 2019). High labour participation and a well-regulated labour market are hallmarks of the Norwegian model, premised on high levels of unionisation, coordinated bargaining and centralised agreements (Bergene and Hansen, 2016; Dølvik and Oldervoll, 2019; Falkum, 2020).

This model of industrial relations has also been a building block in the 'Norwegian oil model', the country's management of its petroleum resources in a democratic and equitable manner (Thurber et al., 2011). Although throughout there have been regular conflicts between environmental concerns and concerns for fishing, the industry has been expected to consider its impact on other industries as well as the environment from the outset (Ryggvik et al., 1997). In the 1970s, the oil industry in Norway was characterised by American labour relations, with high levels of labour conflict and wage growth. With cross-political support, however, the global oil companies were forced into the institutionalised system of industrial relations and wage coordination by the early 1980s. Rebel unions were 'tamed' and started favouring compromise over conflict (Ryggvik, 2018).

Oil exploration and production, located offshore on the Norwegian shelf, has relatively high safety and security standards and has experienced few spillages, in part thanks to strong labour involvement on installations. Often, workers' desire for safe

and healthy work environments corresponded with strict safety procedures that hinder spillages and other environmental hazards (Ryggvik et al., 1997). Consequently, the Norwegian industry regularly terms itself the cleanest in the world. In recent years, however, climate change has challenged this bond between labour and environmental interests as emissions from offshore production and the end-use of petroleum products have led to calls for a transition *away from* petroleum (Normann and Tellmann, 2021).

The Norwegian model of industrial relations with its strong social dialogue mechanisms catering to the interests of labour and capital is considered to balance social and financial issues flexibly and effectively. Some scholars question, however, whether the system is equipped to meet ecological crises and facilitate the green shift (Alsos et al., 2019; Dølvik and Steen, 2018). Moreover, Mildenerger (2020) finds a ‘double representation’ of petroleum interests in the political system, regardless of the colour of the government: under a conservative government, this voice will be carried by business associations, whereas in a Labour Party-led coalition, trade union interests exert a similarly decisive influence. The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) organises about half of the organised workforce and maintains close ties with the Labour Party. In the LO, there is a gentlemen’s agreement of ‘issue ownership’ between affiliates, meaning that the union whose members are directly affected is allowed to determine the LO’s stance on a policy matter. This principle was activated when the LO congress in 2017 decided against full conservation of an oil-rich marine area outside the Lofoten Archipelago despite a large majority of delegates being in favour of protection (Houeland et al., 2021).

Literature on Norwegian unions’ climate change policies tends to focus on the petroleum sector and on policies at the national level. The LO is typically foregrounded and portrayed as a united, collective representative of workers at the aggregate level (Normann and Tellmann, 2021; Mildenerger, 2020). There are fewer studies concerned with how climate change policies are expressed in the ‘micro-model’, involving bipartite relations at the enterprise level. Here, among ‘workplace institutions and relationships’ (Ackers, 2014, p. 2623), Norwegian workers have formal and informal channels for co-determination and participation through elected representatives (Falkum, 2020). Good cooperative labour relations at the workplace level may prove necessary ‘to engage in demanding and potentially risky processes of innovative adjustment’ needed for a green transition (Dølvik and Steen, 2018). However, this level is also arguably most fragile and contested arena in the Norwegian model (Bergene and Hansen, 2016). For the purposes of this article, the shop steward role forms the point of departure in our exploration of role perceptions in a green transition.

Available roles and emerging role perceptions in the world of work

Union activism has occupied scholars of industrial relations for decades. In human geography, the late 1990s saw the emergence of a labour geography tradition that often concerned itself with processes of union renewal. Theoretically, an argument concerning the

agency of labour under capitalism was developed as a counterpoint to capital-centric explanations of socio-economic change. Rather than affording primacy to firms and states, labour geographers argued that ‘workers, too, are *active* geographical agents’ in the (re)making of capitalist landscapes (Herod, 2001, p. 15). Through trade unions in particular, workers shape where and under what conditions work and investment take place.

In the last decade, labour geography has explored the notion of ‘constrained agency’: workers do have a transformative potential, particularly when they organize collectively, but labour agency must be understood ‘*within* complex and variable landscapes of opportunity and constraint’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011, p. 229, our emphasis) – not detached from these. We argue that this relational perspective is characterised by a relatively weak understanding of the *roles* that workers inhabit in these relations. Hence, we suggest that debates in sociology on the importance of role perceptions and reflexivity in structure-agency relations can guide such an endeavour (Archer, 2000; Kemp and Holmwood, 2012).

In the words of the German philosopher Jaeggi (2014, p. 84), ‘we are “caught” in roles and shaped by them,’ but, as a set of rules instructing our actions, roles are also malleable. Through our ability to take up roles and actively appropriate and interpret them according to our own reflexivity, we are simultaneously affirming ourselves as social beings and modifying the script of the roles we play (Jaeggi, 2014). For the British sociologist Archer (2000), roles are crucial because they facilitate the transition from *agents* to *actors*. Agents can have transformative as well as conserving effects on social structures, but workers-qua-agents are ‘lacking a say in structural or cultural modelling’ (Archer, 2000, p. 265). To become actors, they must fill roles where they are able to shape strategic collective action and represent others. In other words, they become *role incumbents*.

Workers who inhabit the role of shop stewards become *representatives of labour*. In the workplace and in systems of industrial relations, this occurs in a very practical sense through a complex set of mandates. Representation can also be symbolic when people speak or act on behalf of others in public discourse (Stokke and Selboe, 2009). Formal roles like the shop steward position are thus supplemented by informal roles such as activists, bridge builders and gatekeepers (Karlsson, 2020). It is important, therefore, to avoid reducing role expectations to their structural features, waiting to be ‘filled by agency’ through a role incumbent (Kemp and Holmwood, 2012). Rather, it is in the interplay between formal and informal roles, between more or less established role perceptions and the strategies of reflexive role incumbents, that labour agency is performed.

To understand how organised labour can act differently, we must therefore come to grips with how trade union roles undergo change. Two scholarly traditions in particular have been concerned with this organisational transformation: the union renewal literature that emerged in the 1990s (e.g. Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Murray et al., 2013) and the more recent rise of environmental labour studies (e.g. Lipsig-Mummé, 2013; Rätzzel and Uzzell, 2011). Both sets of literature implicitly formulate role expectations on behalf of collective actors. In an authoritative book on environmental labour studies, for instance, Rätzzel and Uzzell (2011, p. 7) express the need for unions to ‘(re)invent themselves as social movements’. This is supported by Lipsig-Mummé (2013, p. 35), who proclaims that it is time for unions to involve themselves actively in the development of mitigation

strategies: ‘to become “players”, in other words’. In a recent intervention, Clarke and Lipsig-Mumme (2020, p. 352) also highlight the ‘organization of young workers’ as key to the building of an environmental labour movement. There is a continuity in each of these three strategic manoeuvres – social movement orientation, invigorated activism and the recruitment of new constituencies – that can be traced back to the union renewal tradition.

None of these traditions systematically explore how a collective reorientation translates into new roles and role perceptions for the workers and shop stewards involved. A noteworthy exception can be found in the work of Lundström (2017; Lundström et al., 2015), who has explored how role incumbents of a particular type – ‘organic intellectuals’ – try to promote environmental agendas within their respective unions. His research demonstrates how individual shop stewards can initiate change at the workplace but are constrained by organisational rigidity in their efforts ‘to create new workers’ identities which overcome the divide between nature and work (Lundström et al., 2015, p. 9). The risk of relying solely on the transformative capacities of organic intellectuals should encourage us to investigate the interplay between micro- and meso-level processes of union renewal and, in our case, between role incumbents and the roles they fill.

Räthzel and Uzzell (2011, p. 6) note that a formal role array is already being developed within national and international union organisations: ‘special positions have been created for unionists to take responsibility for environmental issues and to formulate union positions on climate change’. But as previous studies of union renewal have shown, the establishment of additional, formal roles must be accompanied by the re-scripting of existing ones. For this to take place within a trade union, mobilisation of informal roles beyond the union organisation might prove decisive. Yates (2010), for instance, found that the social roles union members play outside work are constitutive of how they fill their union roles. When role incumbents with different views on environmental issues are recruited or existing role incumbents are trained on these matters, the formal role array of the trade union will undergo change as a result.

As trade union roles gradually become infused with expectations of ecological responsibility, shop stewards will likely experience *role ambiguity* as well as *role clarity*, depending on the context. Kemp and Holmwood (2012, p. 405) define role ambiguity as emanating from ‘the way in which a role may be defined differently by different groups of social actors’. To enact change from their given positions, role incumbents must exploit this role ambiguity. However, systemic change seldom occurs from the bottom up without coordination. In their study of the ability of the ‘organizing model’ to place women’s issues on the union agenda, Peetz et al. (2007) found that role clarity was strongly associated with union power. Transformative role incumbents, such as Lundström’s organic intellectuals, cannot therefore abandon their roles unaltered. They must actively seek to rewrite their scripts. This arguably represents an analytical blind spot. In the literature on union renewal and in the nascent field of environmental labour studies, both overwhelmingly based on case studies of collective actors, there is shared affinity for the systematic portrayal of role incumbents who over-perform their own role expectations. In contrast, we examine how individual unionists experience role arrays in existing systems of industrial relations while negotiating role perceptions

from an emerging discourse around climate change. In this way, our study demonstrates how labour agency is constrained in practice.

Contextualising workplace relations

By directing our attention to workplace relations and union activity, and by asking how shop stewards can shape environmental policies, we enter a field where conflict- and cooperation-oriented perspectives fight for dominance. Ackers (2014, p. 2610) has argued that orthodox positions within industrial relations have prioritised ‘a-priori assumptions about power and conflict’ to such an extent that it has hamstrung any attempts to meaningfully acknowledge forms of workplace cooperation. This critique could potentially be detrimental to our efforts to mobilise ideas from labour geography, union renewal studies and labour environmentalism in studying workplace roles and relations as each of these bodies of work is firmly based in a neo-Marxist tradition.

Although workplace efforts to improve sustainability have been placed under the rubric of ‘greening work’ (Lipsig-Mumme, 2013) and sometimes ascribed lesser importance than that of calls for ‘energy democracy’, ‘climate jobs’ and ‘just transition’, we believe that they are crucial to the development of a sense of agency and responsibility throughout the union movement. Furthermore, raising awareness among the rank-and-file is arguably a prerequisite for the development of an environmental union agenda. Therefore, we argue that an exploration of roles and role perceptions is not only compatible with but can constructively inform, neo-Marxist approaches to labour. Here, we concur with Edwards (2014) that workplace/union roles and the ‘structured antagonism’ at the base of the employment relationship belong to different levels of analysis; in what follows, we will concentrate on the former.

Combining workplace studies with explicit analyses of power is a well-established scholarly tradition in Norway (Falkum, 2020), and the above-mentioned ‘micro-model’ of industrial relations is typically conceived of as a ‘conflict partnership’ (Hernes, 2006, p. 18). A question in this regard is how roles constituted within this conflict partnership can represent interests and values that transcend this structured antagonism. Bie-Drivdal (2019, 2020, 2021) has made the most overt attempt at documenting role perceptions among local shop stewards in Norway. Her research on employer-driven professional development in public sector unions has relevant implications for how environmental workplace concerns can be incorporated into the micro-model. Firstly, she finds that professional concerns are seen as peripheral to the bread-and-butter agenda of general unions and have not been included in the scope of collective bargaining. Secondly, these exclusions are found to be customary rather than legal, as both sets of issues are included in the Basic Agreements regulating bipartite relations in the Norwegian system.

Bie-Drivdal (2019, p. 228, our translation) argues that shop stewards in the public sector carry a role perception that is ‘reactive, irrelevant or vague’ with respect to professional development. She contrasts her findings with those of industrial unions in the private sector, where she identifies a long-standing tradition of collaboration between employers and employees around workplace innovation. Crucially, such a widening of

the scope of industrial relations is only possible, Bie-Drivdal argues, if the role perceptions of shop stewards at a workplace level include such a mandate. We find cause for caution and optimism in these findings. On the one hand, if there is potential for incorporating professional development into the everyday union agenda, one could thus hypothesise that a similar outcome would be possible for environmental issues. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that, on this matter, private and public sector unions switch places regarding what they view as a natural part of their representatives' roles (Jordfald and Svalund, 2009; Rätzzel and Uzzell, 2011; Ytterstad, 2013). Precisely because of the close ties between the 'Norwegian oil model' and the country's model of industrial relations, unions representing workers in petroleum extraction and in the supply industry might be particularly hesitant to embrace these new roles. Examining these relationships within the petroleum industry will therefore be the subject of the remainder of this article.

Conversations with unionists

Motivated by our interest in role perceptions, we designed our research around conversations with oil workers. We were interested in those who defined themselves as 'oil workers' and were willing to speak on behalf of other workers; shop stewards were thus a natural choice. We contacted five trade unions with members across the petroleum industry, and with different affiliations in the labour movement.

A shop steward's role cannot be understood in isolation; it is not the possession of an individual but constructed relationally in a social context. Therefore, we chose focus group interviews as our data collection strategy. As the issues we wanted to raise are politically contested, with leadership of different trade unions making statements and taking positions constraining attitudes among the rank-and-file, we decided to group participants according to their union affiliation. Between November 2018 and August 2019, we conducted six focus groups with 42 participants from the following trade unions:

- the United Federation of Trade Unions (*Fellesforbundet*), a general union organising 160,000 members across industries, including the petroleum supply industry;
- *Industri Energi*, a union organising 60,000 members in the petroleum and process industry (in addition to a group of company shop stewards, we met with a branch group from this union);
- the Electrician and IT Workers' Union (*El og IT*), representing 38,000 electricians in petroleum and renewables;
- *SAFE*, an oil union with 10,000 members offshore and on land-based installations; and
- the Norwegian Society of Engineers and Technologists (*NITO*) organising over 90,000 engineers and technologists across sectors.

The selection represents the breadth of the organisational and industrial landscape. The first three unions are affiliates of the LO. *SAFE* belongs to the Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS); *NITO* is a non-affiliated union. The oil industry is overwhelmingly male, and so were 34 of the 42 participants; most female participants worked in

catering or as engineers. The strong proportion of middle-aged workers also reflects an aging workforce in the industry. All participants were Norwegians. In this industry, where migrant workers perform important tasks, particularly in segments with less union protection, this represents a problematic bias on the part of the union movement and for our study.

Each conversation gathered 6–8 people and lasted for a minimum of two hours. The authors functioned as moderator and note-taker, and our aim was to stimulate discussion between participants. The conversation moved through four broad themes, each with direct relevance for how role perceptions had taken shape and how shop stewards filled their roles. First, participants were to define ‘transition’ in general, and the notion of a ‘green transition’ in particular. Thus, they were able to put in their own words what being ‘active geographical agents’ meant to them.

Second, we asked what possibilities and responsibilities shop stewards and their unions have in reducing emissions, facilitating green jobs, and securing their members’ interests in this transition. The conversations thus focused on workers’ influence over workplace processes and union policies. These passages also included participants’ reflections on how role expectations from union leadership, employers and their own members are instrumental in scripting their sense of responsibility.

Third, the participants were encouraged to put in words what role(s) they ascribed to other actors, such as the state, their employers and other firms in the industry. Participants were drawn from different levels of the union hierarchy, from local workplace shop stewards through regional representatives to group union conveners. Most of them were full-time shop stewards and could draw on experiences with different counterparts and institutional networks. In most instances, we found that shop stewards’ policy positions align closely with those of their own leadership. In two unions where oil workers were in the minority, *El og IT* and *NITO*, however, shop stewards expressed concerns with the formal positions of their own unions.

Finally, we centred on portrayals of oil workers in public discourse and gave the participants a chance to describe role expectations shaped by other actors, including their employers and workers in other sectors and countries. Many participants related these questions to their own experiences beyond the workplace, including family relations, local politics and the media debate, displaying the interchange between personal identities and professional roles (see, for instance, Poulsen, 2007). Overall, the ‘oil worker’ is a hotly contested subject in the climate debate. Our focus groups show how representatives of this subject try to engage with the public scripts (see also Jordhus-Lier and Houeland, 2020).

Our conversations were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed using computer-aided qualitative analysis software (NVivo) based on successive stages of analysis. Moving from open coding to theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we discovered that roles and role perceptions were central to our findings. This led us to consult theoretical literature, strategically looking for concepts that could help us connect our data with a scholarly body of work. As we will show, there are several tangents between our theoretical framework and our empirical findings.

'Transition is downsizing': What transition means to shop stewards

Transition in the oil industry carries a meaning prior to, and independent from, climate change debates. When shop stewards speak of the past, transition has positive connotations of flexibility and adaptation. The word is historically associated with pride:

Transition is not new to us. We are doing that continuously. (Fellesforbundet representative).

Many describe how their companies have roots in pre-petroleum fishing, shipyards and factories. The ability of those industries to adjust to the needs of the petroleum sector is a much-used reference. The Norwegian petroleum model was able to create jobs beyond the relatively few jobs in upstream production. The unionists describe workers as part of this transition, albeit not in their capacity as unionised workers. This is reflected in the historical literature on the petroleum industry, including in trade unions' own publications: active agency is placed with visionary politicians and industrial owners (Johansen, 2009; Ryggvik et al., 1997). The Norwegian model of industrial relations, with its active participation of workers and unions, is consigned to a secondary status in historical transitions (Houeland and Jordhus-Lier, 2021).

The global boom period between 2000 and 2014, by one shop steward described as 'a continuous upswing', led to new jobs, increased exploration and high demand for the supply industry along the Norwegian west coast. Thus, the global oil crisis of 2014 hit particularly hard, with up to 50,000 redundancies. Norwegian oil workers have recently gone through several periods of downsizing due to digitalisation, reorganisations and market fluctuations. Consequently, transition is now a word that epitomises deregulation, risk and retrenchments, as well as reduced union influence:

— Another form of transition is downsizing. Less people on the rigs.

— MODERATOR: Is that what it means?

— Yes, to us, that is.

— Yes, to me, transition – at least over the last decade – it is not associated with anything positive. [...] Transitions used to be something we appreciated and supported. Now it is synonymous with downsizing.

(Industri Energi representatives)

The core shop steward role is described as a bulwark defending workplace conditions and job security under pressure. Further, the participants portray the shop steward role as under strain, particularly during the last decade. The undercutting of conditions and wages through the use of migrant workers and hired labour has put shop stewards on the defensive:

Regarding social dumping, that those we hire get decent treatment and all that, what is our focus as shop stewards, right? It is to seek change? (El og IT representative)

Furthermore, the oil worker representatives experience less real influence and come across as reactive. The way transition is detached from co-determination is noteworthy:

Concerning the large transitions I have experienced, I feel we have had relatively limited opportunity to influence them. Decisions are normally made, you are allowed in too late, the agenda is set, and you are used as an ornament. (SAFE representative)

Also others describe union positions and spaces of influence through various forms of industrial relations as primarily a façade and label themselves as ‘useful idiots’. The sense of agency associated with the shop steward role has weakened since the ‘upswing’, and the workers now face ‘a counterpart with sharper edges than before’. Other studies corroborate this description of changes in the Norwegian model, with weakened job security and co-determination at workplaces and less influence of trade shop stewards in general, and in particular in the petroleum industry (Falkum, 2020; Kuldova et al., 2020).

Norwegian oil workers encounter the so-called ‘green transition’ at a moment when transition holds negative connotations of relative disempowerment for workers. Agency is mainly ascribed to business and politicians. In these processes, the shop stewards find role clarity in their mandate to defend working conditions and job security. As researchers, we want to understand whether this new, green transition is seen as emphasising this process, or whether it creates new avenues and opportunities for trade unionists.

‘Not my task’: The green transition and the shop steward

As we move to a more targeted conversation about the meaning of a ‘green transition’, the participants insist on remaining in the narrative. Again, the continuity of transition is emphasised. Oil workers see themselves as key actors in a ‘green transition’ that is anything but new:

The point is, we have been working on this for 20–30 years. It is not as if we have not thought about the climate. We have always worked on that. (NITO representative)

It emerges, however, that they now feature as oil workers – not in their role as shop stewards. In the process of reducing emissions from the labour process – for example, through electrification of offshore installations or in the development of plans for the transition to jobs in renewable energy – they have no clear mandate for their roles as shop stewards. In fact, dominant role perceptions are actively used to exclude new possibilities for this particular role.

I do not feel that is my task; we are an interest organisation to promote our members. I feel that that has little to do with environmental policy. We will help as best we can to achieve the best

possible working conditions ... so I do not feel that is my job. Of course, we are all concerned about it, but that is not my job. (Industri Energi representative)

Both oil workers and their shop stewards can be engaged in environmental issues. Ryggvik et al. (1997, p. 428, our translation) observed this decades ago: 'In 'many oil companies, one could find workers who – from a real engagement – worked to reduce emissions.' Our data suggest, however, that these people, then and now, are individual role incumbents who fill their roles in a particular way; reducing emissions is not a systematic and intrinsic part of these roles. The trade unions themselves carry much of the responsibility for this narrow role perception. None of the shop stewards had received any form of trade union education on climate change or environmental issues. The trade union leadership seems unwilling to infuse the shop steward role with an environmental mandate because the system of industrial relations implicitly discourages a sense of ecological responsibility.

The way shop stewards interpret their responsibilities regarding health, environment and safety (HES) today demonstrates how their roles are demarcated:

My experience is that neither the safety officer nor the shop stewards champion the environment as their issue. Health, environment and safety issues we do discuss, but not the perspective of the outer environment. (EL og IT representative)

The exclusion of the outer environment expressed in this quote contrasts with how historians of the oil industry describe earlier worker struggles in the North Sea. Ryggvik et al. (1997, p. 22, our translation) note that there was a clear 'connection between labour organisation, security and the environment' in the 1970s, suggesting a direct relationship between unions' core interests and environmental concerns. Emissions from flaring, fuel combustion in turbines and chemical exposure not only impact workers' health but also the outer environment and the global climate. In formal definitions of HES in Norway, in law and in collective agreements, the 'E' for the environment includes both the workplace and outer environment (Ellingvåg, 2021). In practice, however, the shop stewards do not work on the outer environment. In cases where workers did describe active involvement in these issues, this was not directly related to the extraction and combustion of petroleum but rather to the use of paint and cleaning chemicals, waste recycling practices and sustainable food. Such efforts to minimise the carbon footprint of existing labour processes can be categorised as 'greening work' (Lipsig-Mummé, 2013).

Outside the petroleum sector, the 'greening work' agenda is championed by service, retail and public sector unions. Some of these have already established environmental clauses in their basic agreements with their respective employers' associations and were, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, in the process of formulating environmental issues and demands in their negotiations (Bjergene and Hagen, 2020). One could hypothesise that the incentive for engaging in this agenda is even greater in the petroleum sector as it can improve the legitimacy of firms involved in petroleum extraction. Calls for 'green bargaining' were not met with enthusiasm in our focus group conversations;

however, as demands for environmentally friendly working time and commuting arrangements were seen to come at the expense of salary demands.

If role expectations facing shop stewards from the union and the industrial relations system lack an environmental mandate, the same can be said about the role perceptions among the members they are elected to represent. When we ask whether participants have had to respond to climate-related requests from their rank and file, no one answers in the affirmative:

I have yet to experience one of my members approaching me to ask about the environment in my duty as a shop steward. (Fellesforbundet representative)

In other words, the environmental mandate appears weak at the workplace level. Another unionist explains that although he expects members to bring up environmental issues, as a shop steward, he would struggle to act on such a request:

If a member or someone from the union board would send a suggestion [about outer environment or climate issues], we would have to discuss it in the union board. How on earth should we engage in that? We see which direction this is taking – can we do anything at this stage to safeguard jobs and to contribute to these environmental issues....? At some point, the question will arise. (El og IT representative)

Amidst this role ambiguity, we can also discern a recognition among the focus group participants that these issues are becoming increasingly relevant: 'It is something in the air.' Some remark that the issue of climate change already affects recruitment to the industry.

I think we are actually starting to realise – or we have talked about it – at the shop steward level, and we now see that the union is taking it seriously. (Industri Energi representative)

Importantly, none of this should be taken as evidence that these workers lack a concern for the environment. Many do and display in-depth competence and knowledge about these issues. Several occupy trusted positions in local politics or in other arenas outside the workplace – and these are described as better-suited arenas for acting on their environmental concerns. A more credible interpretation would be that they implicitly or explicitly relieve the shop steward role of this responsibility and ascribe agency to national union leadership through their sociopolitical role:

I think it is very good if the organisations on a national level engage, but I feel that it is not my task as a representative of the members. (Industri Energi representative)

Although it might be convenient to transfer this responsibility to another level of decision-making, the shop stewards also see the risk involved in such a position:

Regarding transitions, we are at a place where we recognise that we need to be part of that process, or it will go too fast and too far. We [the branch unions] and our colleagues out there and others, need to influence [the process]. (Industri Energi representative)

This last reflection ended with a precaution and reminder of the weakened workers' and union influence, and the speaker's sense of limited agency.

We find contradictory experiences with the green transition. The focus group participants claim to be agents in the green transition through their profession, and many explicitly fear that a green transition will further deteriorate working conditions and union rights. Nevertheless, shop stewards lack the necessary role clarity that would encourage them to embrace an environmental mandate. Thus, as actors, their role remains passive (through the national union representatives) or defensive ('climate change does not belong at the workplace'). At the same time, the oil workers' representatives find themselves in the crossfire in a political discourse where external expectations are high. This brings us into the third question, namely, how our respondents experience are being ascribed roles by others, in particular through public conversations in the media.

'Those who destroy the planet': How others see oil workers

The social roles that Norwegian oil workers inhabit must be understood in the context of the conflicting social narratives about the petroleum industry. Whereas climate activists and green politicians argue for disengagement from the petroleum industry, actors within the oil industry emphasize that Norwegian petroleum production is relatively cleaner than extraction elsewhere and frame their products as 'bridging fuels', natural gas in particular, that will help Europe's coal phase-out. The socio-economic impact of 'the Norwegian oil adventure' is typically used to offset or legitimise the negative carbon footprint of their work. Throughout our conversations, the oil workers reiterate their socio-economic role as contributors to financing the country's welfare state.

Against this backdrop, it comes as no surprise that shop stewards become quite emotional when describing how the climate change debate has transformed their social role from hero to villain:

To be tabloid, there has been a development from being 'the good guys' to becoming 'the bad guys'. We ... who once contributed to a positive societal development, employment, and value creation, we are now primarily contributors to destroying the planet. (Fellesforbundet representative)

Compared to public sector unions, who are used to negotiating expectations from the public as industrial relations partners (Jordhus-Lier, 2012), oil workers and their unions are historically less accustomed to this cross-pressure. Changing expectations from politicians, consumers and younger generations come across as unclear or unrealistic. As one representative expressed it,

You feel that you have an environmental movement and some politicians who believe that we should transition to unemployment. (Fellesforbundet representative)

Criticism from actors socially and geographically distant from the oil industry is accompanied by a perceived fall in social status – and a growing stigma attached to the industry. Workers often meet this among younger generations who, according to one shop steward, feel ‘ashamed’ to say that they have a ‘father or a father-in-law who works in the oil industry’.

It used to be high status to work in the oil ... I think that the development from being a high-status profession to now – in this environmental debate – to being no-no-stuff, it has gone insanely fast (Industri Energi representative)

Paradoxically, one dimension that has proved hard to shake is the myth of the privileged oil worker. As much as our respondents recognise that many still enjoy high salaries and decent conditions, they stress that this is often a smaller section of workers in the industry, in particular offshore work in production companies. When unionists representing workers in contractor companies try to resist the pressure on contracts and working conditions that has increased since 2014, this generalization functions as a constraint:

In relation to wages and working conditions, the media tends to present offshore work more much more glamorous than it actually is. (El og IT representative)

This myth not only delegitimise their concerns as shop stewards but it also combines with a polarized climate discourse that hampers a public debate about changing working conditions in the industry. As a result, shop stewards find themselves disempowered in their roles as representatives.

It is clear that it is useless to talk about – and to be believed – that we have weakened conditions. It’s like: ‘Yeah, it’s what you deserve. It should have happened 30 years ago’. (SAFE representative)

The dominant narrative on the oil industry is primarily framed around climate change in a way that hinders them from fulfilling their key role as shop stewards: defending their members’ working conditions.

In sum, the oil workers feel portrayed as obstacles to a green future. This contrasts with their self-perception as active agents in an ongoing green transition and as key contributors to the welfare state. They refer to a public debate that is about them – but without their voice – and a dominant narrative that raises unrealistic expectations of them. Having demonstrated how oil workers and their shop stewards experience the contemporary climate change discourse as debilitating their role as workers’ representatives, we will now examine how they envision a green transition unfolding. Specifically, we are interested in understanding how they ascribe agency to other actors in society.

'We need to reduce consumption': What oil workers expect from others

As long as our conversations centre upon limitations in their own roles and the stigma caused by others, the participants in our focus group discussions construct a relatively coherent narrative. This narrative resonates with talking points from national union leaders and business associations and includes calls for more 'knowledge-based' positions by politicians, youth and environmental activists. When participants are asked to formulate their expectations of others' roles, however – and these are set against the overarching goal of decarbonisation – the answers appear fractured. This incoherence notwithstanding, we are able to extract some basic insights from the conversations.

As shown above, oil workers anticipate playing a role in a green transition, but they do not see themselves doing so without the help and facilitation of other actors. When our respondents try to put the 'green transition' into their own words, three sets of actors are emphasised: those who regulate the industry, those who employ them and those who consume their products. Firstly, politicians and political parties are seen as the most relevant agents of change. Here, our respondents draw on a historical parallel from their own industry's birth, where foresighted politicians are framed as protagonists in a narrative in which workers in the emerging oil industry are framed as opportunists (Houeland and Jordhus-Lier, 2021). Illustratively, one shop steward referred to a fellow focus group participant who had shared his experience as a local politician:

Maybe more of us should do like him? Engage in party politics. To take part. (Fellesforbundet representative)

Politics are, in other words, seen as the realm of change. At the same time, oil workers view the answers currently provided by political actors with deep-seated scepticism. More specifically, political parties and environmental movements are unable to convince this constituency that they have a trustworthy path towards a truly green industry:

In the current political debate, we get the impression that we ought to transition away from oil and gas towards a new industry that nobody knows what is, really. [Interrupted by many expressing agreement.] To a green industry, but one cannot answer what that green industry is. (Fellesforbundet representative)

In the unionists' opinion, the main role of politicians is to *facilitate* a gradual transition according to a long-term plan, where the workers are listened to. Contrary to our expectations, the participants did not call for new green investments and concrete job alternatives in their criticism of politicians. Rather, they demand stability and long-term horizons. Politicians are expected to enable the industry, not succumb to environmentalists' call for an end date. A year after our conversations with the shop stewards, when the pandemic hit Norway, this expectation was clearly expressed in the joint lobbying campaign for a condition-free stimulus package for the petroleum industry by industrial unions and business interests.

Secondly, oil workers have high expectations of their own employers. Employers are expected to be innovators. They acknowledge, however, that the corporate landscape in the petroleum industry is far from a level playing field. Their version of a green transition stresses the dominant role of operators, and in particular the almost monopolistic role of the majority state-owned company Equinor. Operator companies control demand in the supply industry and, through requirements and budgetary frames in their contracts, shape the room for innovation, environmental standards and working conditions, especially offshore. Unionists testify that when consulting their company's tendering processes, they end up in a dilemma, where insisting on safety for their workers and for environmental concerns comes at the expense of future income security. As in any typical boom-and-bust industry, workers experience frustration with cyclical fluctuations and see the downturn since 2014 as a direct threat to innovation. Here, we discern a paradox in the collective narrative, as periods of growth typically provide optimism and a level of activity that also leaves little room for transition. As one shop steward put it, 'When you have time, you lack money; when you have money, you lack time.'

The ability to innovate in the industry is explicitly linked to demand in the market, including public procurement. Without a demand for green industrial products and competitive prices for renewable energy, the companies employing our respondents are described as unable to transition – notwithstanding their *ability* to supply green products. This brings us to the third actor in the oil workers' description, namely the consumers. The respondents – from catering staff and supply industry workers to engineers and rig operators – clearly feel that they represent the point of production in a hydrocarbon value chain where the point of consumption often takes centre stage in arguments about an energy transition:

What is wrong with the environmental debate is that we are supposed to reduce oil production. That is not the solution. We need to reduce consumption, then the rest will follow naturally. (Industri Energi representative)

A leading figure in the trade union confederation (LO-Norway) makes the same link, repeatedly stating in public that 'today's climate striking youth are tomorrow's market' (e.g. Eide and Tomasgard, 2021). This formulation is symptomatic of how actors in the oil industry, unionised workers among them, attempt to discourage the political agency of environmental actors while emphasising their economic agency as consumers.

The oil workers also included themselves in the consumer role, underlining their personal responsibility and explicitly mentioning their use of electric vehicles and their recycling habits at home. Although they willingly accept responsibility for their practices *as private consumers*, they are much less eager to stand accountable for petroleum end consumption *as workers*:

We are an industry that makes installations to extract oil and gas, right? How that is used is ... not our problem. (El og IT representative)

Although this quote is representative of many of our conversations, there are also those who challenge this disclaimer:

The Norwegian oil industry produced much, much cleaner than the whole world. That is how it is. But we produce a product that is burnt. So, it is... also a little bit our responsibility. (Fellesforbundet representative)

In summary, the shop stewards we talked to seem to put their faith in a troika of social actors – politicians, petroleum companies and consumers. However, their concrete expectations of each of these are vague, which only increases the risk of leaving agency to others.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the strength of organised labour in Norway, oil workers have yet to demonstrate their ability to act strategically and independently on issues of climate mitigation at the workplace. As seen from the Norwegian petroleum industry, the green transition brings new expectations that do not fit the union role as experienced and institutionalised. Trade unionists taking part in our conversations describe themselves as green protagonists in terms of their professional capacities, or as private consumers, but not in their roles as shop stewards. The current lack of a defined ‘climate actor role’ as shop stewards is not easily reconciled with role expectations currently produced in public discourse – by media, environmental activists, academics (like us!) and politicians – on their behalf. In a climate discourse where impatience and calls for action dominate, epitomised by demands for an end date to petroleum extraction, oil workers feel like their social role as actors with agency is under pressure. This is not simply a question of formal mandates. Having invested in a self-portrayal as pillars of society, they are now faced with a social identity as ‘climate villains’. The shift in representation forces this group of workers on the defensive and affects their motivation to take part in a green transition – at least on the terms presented to them.

In response, oil workers insist that the initiative lies with politicians, companies and consumers, not with themselves. This response might prove risky in the long run, especially considered the unresolved tension in the shop stewards’ role perceptions towards others. Furthermore, shop stewards’ influence on these external actors is indirect and mandated to national union leaders. In a fast-changing context with a polarised public debate, the lack of climate role at the workplace level – the arena for green innovation both within and away from the fossil – risks a lack of grounding for the unions’ national policy engagement.

Our analysis also informs our theoretical framework, where the notion of labour agency was put in contact with theories on roles and role perceptions. The case presented here demonstrates how *role clarity* and *role ambiguity* are relative phenomena. Feeling assured in their role as representatives of their members on issues of working conditions and wages (and the HES system in a narrow sense), they have little incentive to take on new issues and perspectives in a system where rights, procedures and mandates are firmly

institutionalised. One role inhibits the other. As a result, our respondents strongly felt a part of the green transition in their capacity as workers, but the role of *shop steward* neither seemed to offer them tools nor a mandate for representing environmental concerns. Our primary story is therefore that climate change is not part of the shop steward role.

In effect, the role of the shop steward appears ‘reactive, irrelevant or vague’ (Bie-Drivdal, 2019) on environmental issues: *reactive* because reactivity is already part of the script of the shop steward; *irrelevant* in part because of the distance oil workers feel from climate politics in general; and *vague* because shop stewards rightfully struggle to operationalise and fill the ‘green agenda’ with meaning.

Paradoxically, the flexibility characterising the ‘Norwegian model’ of industrial relations – in terms of meeting economic crises with high levels of trust and co-determination at micro and macro level – appears rigid when the same model encounters the climate crisis. In the petroleum industry, shop stewards’ roles appear so well established in their opposition to changes in the form of digitalisation, retrenchments and failing safety standards that playing the role of a protagonist on environmental issues – although formally available – seem out of reach.

Some of our findings might in part reflect the particular national context. At the same time, some of the questions on agency of others – what are the limits of state regulation and investment, and how can consumer liability be understood in the fossil economy? – are likely to resonate with debates surrounding petroleum workers and transition elsewhere. Similarly, questions of how to create meaningful, relevant and clear roles for shop stewards in climate change, should have resonance in other contexts: Should they concern themselves with emissions from the labour process at the workplace? Or should they involve themselves in sustainable procurement and waste handling? Are they expected to formulate demands in collective bargaining that carve out an independent stance for employees vis-à-vis the sustainability policies of their employers? Or are they supposed to offer their members training that allows them to find employment outside the petroleum sector? Although all of these roles are possible, as they pertain to initiatives of unions elsewhere or corporate visions in the Norwegian state-petroleum complex, industrial unions and their representatives have not yet taken any real ownership of any of them. Across all focus groups in this study, there has been consensus that change, in the form of a green transition, will come through restructuring the petroleum industry, not by abandoning it.

Although the shop stewards we talked to do not see the green transition as their task, we see both a need and potential for a shop steward role that actively relates to the green transition. Some unionists we talked to have already anticipated this. Climate change policies challenge the core interests of their members in the form of reduced job security, a tendency that has escalated since our conversations in 2018–2019. Gradually, the public conversation treats the green shift as a matter of the here and now, not a question for an abstract future.

Nevertheless, the unions’ defensive stance was on full display during the 2020 pandemic and we see no concerted effort from the trade unions to rescript the roles of shop stewards. Continuing the unions’ reactive strategy may prove risky. The

responsibility for changing the status quo ought not to be placed on the shoulders of role incumbents. Rather, resolving this problem requires system change, and further understanding of the potential for active workers' roles in climate mitigation. It is primarily the responsibility of the union leadership to help redefine a role for shop stewards in a green transition. Such a role cannot imply simply sticking to their guns, and it must transcend expectations from activists that they simply ask their members to quit their jobs.


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