



Framing the just transition: How international trade unions engage with UN climate negotiations

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses international trade unions' engagement with climate change. Using a qualitative methodology based on an analysis of interviews and archive documents, the article investigates the factors shaping the climate policies of the international union movement. It finds that these policies have been framed at the nexus of unions' internal politics, coalition strategies and the institutional environment of the UNFCCC process. As a result of contentious intra-organizational politics, contrasting alliances with external organizations and the institutional constraints of the UNFCCC process, international unions' climate policies have been torn between the competing priorities of ensuring workers' economic security and protecting the climate, leading to the inherently ambiguous just transition framework. The article speaks to the broader issues of the socio-political forces affecting global climate governance and, ultimately, to the preconditions for an inclusive transition to a low-carbon economy.

1. Introduction

International climate policies are shaped not only by national governments, but also by cities and regions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), companies and employer organizations (Bäckstrand et al. 2017). While the action of these non-state actors is widely addressed in the literature, the role of the international trade union movement is often overlooked.

Unions have engaged with climate policies at various levels. International union organizations have sponsored the just transition, a concept which has been taken up by environmental justice groups and indigenous rights groups, but also by businesses and national governments, and now occupies a prominent place in global climate politics (Newell and Mulvaney 2013, Morena et al. 2019). At national and industry level, unions representing workers from fossil fuel-dependent industries have mostly opposed stringent mitigation policies, while unions in industries with a lower carbon footprint have developed proactive climate policies (Räthzel and Uzzell 2013, Felli 2014, Thomas and Doerflinger 2020). Depending on their climate policy goals, unions have enacted contrasting coalition strategies, building lobbying alliances either with employer organizations or environmental NGOs (Obach 2004, Mildenerger 2020, Thomas 2021). Case studies have furthermore investigated national examples of just transition policies, focusing mostly on the United States, Canada, Australia, Western Europe

and South Africa (Swilling et al. 2016, Galgóczi 2020, Herberg et al. 2020, Cha et al. 2021). Emergent research has analyzed unions' climate discourses, their framings of the labor-environment nexus and the genealogy of the just transition rhetoric (Räthzel and Uzzell 2011, Hampton 2015, Stevis and Felli 2015).

While the previous literature on labor-climate relations has mainly outlined the sectoral and national diversity of unions' climate strategies and their differing understandings of the just transition concept, this article investigates the formation of international trade unions' climate policies from the 1990s to the late 2010s. Instead of considering unions as unitary organizations with stable policy preferences, the article draws upon both organization theory and social movement studies (Davis et al. 2005) to dissect the formulation of international unions' climate policies. It investigates in particular the interrelationship between unions' internal politics and the constraints and opportunities provided by their engagement with external actors and processes.

Based on an analysis of interviews and archive documents, the article finds that the international trade union movement has developed its climate policies at the nexus of unions' contentious internal politics, contrasting coalition strategies and the institutional environment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. The framing of climate change mitigation policies has evolved as a result of these heterogeneous influences. The article focuses on the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and its pre-2006

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predecessor, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Painting a fuller picture of the organizational politics, variety of interactions and institutional constraints shaping unions' climate policies, the article speaks to the broader issues of the role of non-state actors in global climate governance and, ultimately, to the preconditions for an inclusive transition to a low-carbon economy.

We use two strands of literature to discuss trade unions' engagement with climate change. We build on the relevant literature on the role of non-state actors in UN climate negotiations, with a particular focus on consensus-building processes within transnational networks of non-state actors. In addition, we consider the literature on the political sociology of international trade unionism, focusing on the framing function performed by international union organizations.

Numerous non-state actors engage with the UN climate negotiations, using policy research, political advocacy or collective mobilization in their attempts to exert influence over the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings held by the UNFCCC (Betsill and Corell 2007, Schroeder and Lovell 2012, Bäckstrand et al. 2017). While environmental NGOs advocate more stringent mitigation commitments, companies and employer organizations pursue more heterogeneous strategies (Meckling 2015). In particular, fossil fuel companies and their allies have questioned the need for climate action, instead advocating non-decision-making (McCrigh and Dunlap 2011, Mildener 2020). The centralized nature of international climate negotiations, their reliance on expert knowledge and the UNFCCC's recognition of official constituencies, coordinated by focal points, incentivizes non-state actors to pool their resources and organize cross-nationally (Kuyper and Bäckstrand 2016). Transnational organizational networks face coordination and accountability issues, which can however be overcome by "socially skilled actors" able to develop policy agendas within organizations, induce cooperation in others and build coalitions (Fligstein 2001). Coalition building can in particular be expected to give the participating organizations access to new cognitive and strategic resources, possibly inflecting their own policy positions (Meckling 2011).

Although less visible in climate negotiations than environmental NGOs, industries and companies, trade unions are a formal UNFCCC constituency (Silverman 2006, Rosenberg 2019). Trade union participation in the UNFCCC process is coordinated by the ITUC which claims to represent 200 million members in 163 countries and represents workers in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ITUC endeavors to enact global campaigns, notably in support of persecuted trade unionists or for the inclusion of labor standards in international trade agreements (Bourque and Hennebert 2011). International unions have a framing and coordinating function, with one of their key activities being the production and dissemination of knowledge through reports, conferences and training (Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick 2012, Ford and Gillan 2015). Social movement studies have demonstrated that intra-organizational conflicts over framing play a key role in shaping collective action (Benford 1993, Snow et al. 2014). Such conflicts can be expected to be particularly relevant for a cross-national organization like the ITUC, whose affiliates have unequal resources and pursue different interests and priorities (Collombat 2009, Bieler 2012). Indeed, the whole history of international labor organizations is fraught with (geo) political divisions (Gumbrell-McCormick 2013).

To arrive at its findings, this article uses three sources of data: (a) semi-structured interviews; (b) ICFTU and ITUC archive material (meeting minutes, internal letters and emails, policy documents); and (c) media sources. We conducted 23 in-depth interviews with current and former officials subsequently in charge of climate policies at the ICFTU and ITUC, representatives of national union confederations and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), as well as public policymakers with knowledge of international climate negotiations. A purposive sampling strategy was pursued, with interviewees selected on the basis of their experience in working on climate policies, their level of expertise and access to information (Kumar et al. 1993).

We start by looking at the influence of intra-union politics on the international union movement's positions on climate mitigation policies, before moving on to show how specialized union officials and coalition-building have contributed to unions' climate strategies. We end by considering how unions' participation in the UNFCCC process has given focus and structure to their climate engagement.

2. "Not in a position to come forward with concrete recommendations": Deadlocked climate policies

During the early phase of international climate policymaking in the 1990s, the internal politics and organizational set-up of the international union movement constrained its ability to take position on climate policies. Organizational studies have underlined the role of both formal structures and informal power relations in shaping the policies pursued by international unions (Croucher and Cotton 2009, Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick 2012). Because of international unions' tradition of consensual decision-making, affiliated unions with a focus on defending the entrenched interests of their members in carbon-intensive industries were initially able to exert disproportionate influence and obstruct the development of encompassing climate strategies by the international union leadership. However, during the debate over a follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol in the second half of the 2000s, internal realignments and the setting up of specific union bodies allowed the international union movement to move away from previous organizational routines and to develop more proactive climate policies.

2.1. Obstructionist national affiliates and the debate over the Kyoto Protocol

In the 1990s, social and environmental sustainability emerged as a new transnational topic for the international union movement. The ICFTU's involvement with environmental policies dated back to the UN Conference on Environment and Development – the "Earth Summit" – held in 1992 in Rio (Silverman 2004). Adopted at the conference, the Agenda 21 recognized trade unions as one of the nine major groups key to decision-making on sustainable development. Such recognition by international institutions is a crucial source of legitimacy for international unions as it allows them to represent workers' interests in multilateral negotiations (Hyman 2005). The objective of the ICFTU leadership to position international unionism as a proactive stakeholder in environmental politics collided, however, with the vested interests of a number of affiliates, as the debates over the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 reveal.

Lacking authority over their affiliates upon whom they are financially dependent, international union organizations have a tradition of consensual decision-making. Though this does not mean that unanimity is necessary, the international leadership needs to take the points of views of key affiliates into account when making important policy decisions (Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick 2012). In contrast to the international union organizations and their pursuit of broad policy goals, the national affiliates are beholden to the defense of narrower and sometimes conflicting policy goals, rooted in sectoral priorities, national economies and ideological union identities (Hyman 2001, Hyman 2005, Thomas and Doerflinger 2020). In terms of political influence and financial contributions, key national affiliates of the ICFTU and its successor, the ITUC, are the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the Japanese Trade Union Confederation Rengo, the German Trade Union Confederation DGB and the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) (Croucher and Cotton 2009). In the run-up to the Kyoto conference, debates over climate policies were characterized by disagreements among these key affiliates.

Several unions, mostly from Europe, were in favor of the ICFTU supporting binding emission reduction targets, among them the British TUC, the German DGB and the Spanish union confederation CCOO. In addition to being based in less carbon-intensive economies, these unions

have also a history of wider-ranging political involvement, leading them to consider broader societal concerns when taking policy positions (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). Conversely, the AFL-CIO, the ICFTU affiliate with the largest membership and greatest political weight, led opposition to a stricter climate engagement. Focused on its fight against the offshoring of manufacturing jobs to Mexico and Asia (Luce and Bonacich 2009, Kay 2011) and steeped in the business unionist tradition of narrow economic demands (Godard 2009), the AFL-CIO considered any climate agreement that would not bind developing countries as harmful to the US economy, at the time the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Several AFL-CIO affiliates in carbon-intensive industries, first and foremost the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), highlighted the adverse effects of climate mitigation policies and lobbied US policymakers not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. According to a key member of the ITUC's working group on climate change who regularly interacted with the US union delegations to the COP meetings, the UMWA was very influential within the AFL-CIO:

“The perennial reason why the US delegation was held back was the UMWA. They had a strong negative influence on American labor opinion [...] In the end, the mining unions had got there first, and they got control of the agenda. It was not just them [...] some of the transport unions were not necessarily on board at that time, they were transporting freight-coal [...] and some of the construction workers were also not having any of it. [...] The miners and a couple of other unions were very, very tough players in the game, very difficult and they were very influential on the AFL-CIO General Council.” (Interview, ITUC official)

As a result of the deadlocked internal discussion, the ICFTU statement on the Kyoto conference in December 1997 did no more than spell out the dilemma unions faced over climate change, without trying to resolve it: “Trade unions are concerned about the job losses [...] but are also well aware that failure to plan for deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions will also have grave consequences for working people” (ICFTU 1997). The statement also questioned the “value of adopting yet another ‘protocol’ or legal instrument”, citing “considerable reaction to the prospect of granting developing countries preferential treatment with respect to targets and deadlines”, an acknowledgement of the AFL-CIO position (ICFTU 1997).

In the following years, the ICFTU did not come up with any substantial positions on climate change mitigation policies, instead mostly raising caveats and calling for further discussions and clarification. While recognizing the need for climate action, the ICFTU did not take concrete positions on target-setting and implementation, focusing instead exclusively on the employment-related aspects of climate policies. In October 1999, the ICFTU general secretary informed the UNFCCC executive secretary that the ICFTU had to postpone a planned workshop at the 1999 COP in Bonn, Germany, because unions “would not yet be in a position this November to come forward with concrete recommendations” (ICFTU letter 1999).

The pressure for non-decision-making (McCright and Dunlap 2011) exerted by affiliates from carbon-intensive industries thus prevented the ICFTU from taking position on the Kyoto Protocol and from effectively positioning itself on international climate policies. The outsized influence of the affiliates opposed to climate action confirms the established view that concentrated economic interests tend to prevail over broader, albeit more diffuse interests (Olson 1971, Offe and Wiesenthal 1980).

2.2. Internal realignments in the run-up to the Copenhagen conference

During the second half of the 2000s, the international union movement adopted a different stance in the debate over a follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. The 2006 merger of the ICFTU and the smaller Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL) led to a broadening of the base of affiliates, with the leadership of the resultant

ITUC striving to strengthen the organization's capacity to engage with climate policies.

In the context of the merger, unions not previously affiliated either to the ICFTU or the WCL joined the ITUC. Some of them came from a more conflict-oriented tradition, such as the French General Confederation of Labor with its Communist background, or the Argentinian General Confederation of Labor linked to the Peronist movement (Rosemberg 2019). Parallel to this internal political diversification, the ITUC leadership created specific union bodies to draft policy positions on the follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol, a political issue of growing importance. Climate policies had previously been discussed within the ICFTU working group on Health, Safety and Environment which covered a wide range of issues, such as the regulation of chemical pollutants, asbestos fibers and broader sustainability issues. The newly created structures, not tied to existing routines and less likely to follow pre-existing paths and interests, contributed to a reframing of union climate policies.

In 2007, the ITUC leadership convened a “task force on green jobs and climate change” composed of members of the ITUC Executive Bureau. A key goal of the task force was to contribute to reaching a consensus over climate policies among national affiliates. An introductory document to the first meeting of the task force specified: “there are some areas of this subject [the conclusion of a post-Kyoto agreement] where it has proven difficult to reach agreement among the trade union movement in the past, and the Task Force can provide a forum for further debate with a view to assisting the ITUC General Council to reach a consensus” (ITUC 2008a). A 2008 task force report spelled out the areas on which unions were striving to reach common positions before the COP meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, which was expected to adopt binding decisions for the post-Kyoto period: “the post-2012 emission reduction target, emission reduction commitments for developed countries, emission reduction actions for developing countries, technology transfer and development, and investment and financial flows” (ITUC 2008c). In the ensuing discussion, members of the task force cautioned “not to underestimate potential conflicts within the trade union movement around these issues (i.e. between different sectors, different generations, or between workers from the North and workers from the South)” (ITUC 2008c).

While the task force endeavored to create a consensus among the ITUC leadership, an “Ad-hoc working group on climate change” was also formed. Composed of representatives of national affiliates (initially mostly European unions) particularly involved with climate change, the working group's main objective was to prepare for the ITUC's participation at the COP meetings. A former chair of the working group described it as “quite a hybrid body, made up of delegates who could make it to the COPs, some general secretaries, some senior policy advisers, some regional officials of unions, and even some shop stewards” (Interview, ITUC official). Given that the group was mainly composed of officials advocating a stronger union engagement with climate policies, the group de facto fulfilled a dual role according to this official: “it was a pressure group on the ITUC, as well as a representative body of the ITUC” (Interview, ITUC official). This confirms research showing that international trade unionism, with its unequal distribution of technical expertise and political influence between affiliates, often relies on close working relationships between smaller groups and key affiliates to reach decisions (Cotton and Gumbrell-McCormick 2012).

The climate policies of international unions were thus characterized by tensions and conflicts. Disagreements among core affiliates, underlain by differing sectoral interests and understandings of unions' role in society (Hyman 2001, Godard 2009), led to an internal deadlock during the initial phase of unions' engagement with climate change. It was not until the founding of the ITUC and the debate over a follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol that the international union movement engaged more proactively with climate policies going beyond the reiteration of the jobs versus environment dilemma. But unions' climate policies were also shaped by coalition-building, as we will see in the next

section.

3. Borrowed resources: specialized union officials and coalition-building

Climate change and international climate negotiations represent a new topic for unions. Lacking knowledge in this area removed from its primary domains of campaign (work and working conditions), the international union movement has relied on officials with an atypical background and built coalitions with allies able to provide technical expertise, be they companies or multilateral institutions. Such coalitions make it possible for unions to “borrow” resources and influence from other organizations, thereby increasing their capacity to take position (Rose 2000, Zartman and Rubin 2000).

3.1. Specialized union officials

A degree of technical expertise on environmental policies, as well as the ability to build informal contacts and establish relations of trust are indispensable to exerting influence on government delegations at COP meetings and on the members of the UNFCCC secretariat (Dodds and Strauss 2004, Schroeder and Lovell 2012). To engage with climate policies and to enhance their capacity to interact with the relevant UNFCCC parties and stakeholders, unions have relied on specialized officials.

Compared to the average union representative, these officials had atypical profiles. The first ICFTU official in charge of climate issues had a professional background as an environmental NGO activist against industrial pollution and was a founding member of the Canadian Environmental Network in 1977. His successor had a human rights background and took up a top leadership position at Greenpeace International after her time at the ITUC. The current ITUC official in charge of climate policies is an ecological economist by training who previously worked for the Flanders Environment and Nature Council in Belgium, among others. Due to their multi-positionality and ability to induce cooperation in representatives from other organizations (Fligstein 2001), these officials were able to connect the internal debates of international trade unionism with the broader issues discussed by the environmental NGOs and public policymakers taking part in the UNFCCC process, and to put forward positions able to win broader acceptance. Their access to different social networks was also important in overcoming class divides between the mainly working-class unions and mostly middle-class-sponsored environmental NGOs (Rose 2000, Obach 2004).

While the background and resources of these union officials in charge of climate policies constituted an advantage when building coalitions with other stakeholders, their approach and views were not necessarily in line with those of many union representatives. This is illustrated by the point of view of a long-time member of the ITUC's working group on climate change, who considered that some of the ITUC's specialized officials lacked the necessary trade union experience to be able to convince union officials and members:

“If you haven't had grounding in a trade union, if you haven't met employers and then had to report back to union members on a pay bargaining deal or some health and safety issue. If you haven't had that experience, if instead your experience is about campaigning on human rights and environmental degradation in community-based actions, you won't really understand the mentality of a trade union representative, official or worker. What they expect of their union.” (Interview, ITUC official)

Some national and regional union representatives were also skeptical about the general positioning of the international union movement on climate policies. A former leading member of the ETUC in charge of environmental issues thus expressed reservations about the ITUC's

climate advocacy:

“The ITUC resembles an NGO a lot more than a union playing its particular role [...] taking on responsibility in our very function, in industrial relations, in negotiations and in the economic system.” (Interview, ETUC leader)

While the rapprochement of the ITUC vis-à-vis environmental NGOs was criticized by some union leaders, the presence of union officials with an atypical background facilitated interactions with other stakeholders in the UNFCCC process, helping unions to grapple with the technical dimensions of climate policies. Besides the hiring of specialized officials, unions also gained access to expert knowledge through coalitions with external organizations.

3.2. Coalition-building politics

Alliances with external organizations had both a cognitive and strategic dimension. They allowed unions to overcome their lack of resources and to incorporate expert knowledge, while at the same time conferring broader legitimacy on their policy positions and broadening their capacity to exert influence. Social movement scholars have argued that the goal orientations of organizations constrain their choice of coalition partners (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Obach 2004). In the case of trade unions' climate policies, unions pursuing narrow economic interests concluded strategic alliances with employer organizations. On the other hand, international unions, pursuing more encompassing policy goals, built coalitions with multilateral organizations, which tended to align them with the issues and targets discussed in the global climate negotiations, positioning them among those working towards an international climate agreement (Gough and Shackley 2001).

As we have seen, the initial engagement of the ICFTU with climate policies was characterized by internal tensions. In 1996, one of the leading obstructionist unions in these debates, the UMWA, had entered a coalition with the coal-mining industry organization Bituminous Coal Operators' Association to lobby policymakers over the Kyoto Protocol. This alliance was based on coordinated strategies and transfers of knowledge, as well as of organizational and political resources. Both organizations jointly funded a report by an economic forecasting firm on the impact of the Kyoto Protocol on energy markets, which predicted that the Kyoto Protocol would have an adverse economic impact and lead to employment losses (DRI/McGraw-Hill 1997). The UMWA also mandated as its representative to the AFL-CIO delegations at the COP meetings an attorney specialized in representing labor and industry clients in energy and environmental matters, among others a major coal industry advocacy group, the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity. An ICFTU official in charge of following up climate policies considered that the UMWA gained an edge in internal debates by contracting out its representation:

“The mine workers were working pretty closely with the American state and some of the mining companies. [...] They put a lot of money into what they were doing right off the bat. We very rarely saw trade union leaders involved in the process; it was the legal firms that serviced the unions. The representatives of the mine workers were always lawyers who had money and came with assistants who actually knew what they were talking about on the climate change file. So you would be in the very weird situation where your antagonist is at the same table as you are, and they know more, and so they are capable of undermining your work much more easily.” (Interview, ICFTU official)

The ICFTU and subsequently the ITUC mainly sought collaboration with multilateral organizations and UN agencies, pursuing two objectives: to increase unions' capacity to engage with the novel issue of climate change and to contribute to establishing a broader international consensus around the need to address social issues in the climate debate.

The international union movement thus cooperated with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where unions have a consultative status, and the ILO, a tripartite UN agency including governments, employers and trade unions. As far back as 1999, the ICFTU leadership had stated its goal “to engage both organizations [ILO and OECD] in a process to help clarify the elements needed for social transition” in the field of climate change (ICFTU 1999). In 2015, the ILO eventually adopted “guidelines” for a just transition during a tripartite conference (ILO 2015).

Unions also collaborated with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which had developed a program to increase unions’ capacity to participate in environmental policymaking. For instance, in 2006 the ICFTU participated in the “Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment”, organized by the UNEP to discuss in particular the implications of climate change for workers. The meeting brought together 150 union representatives from developing and developed countries, along with environmental experts and policymakers. The UNEP subsequently funded Sustainlabour, a union-affiliated foundation tasked with providing support and training to unions, in particular from developing countries, on environmental issues and specifically climate change. In 2007, in collaboration with the ILO and the International Organisation of Employers, the UNEP and the ITUC jointly launched the “Green Jobs Initiative”, an initiative aimed at raising the profile of employment issues in climate discussions.

While multi-positioned officials contributed to bridge established organizational boundaries, coalition-building helped unions overcome their lack of resources (Rose 2000, Zartman and Rubin 2000). But unions’ climate policies were also influenced by their participation in the UNFCCC process, as we will show in the following section.

4. The institutional constraints of the UNFCCC process and union climate policies

Participation in the annual COP meetings and the aim to become an official “constituency” of the UNFCCC (Silverman 2006, Rosemberg 2019) were important in shaping and structuring the engagement of international trade unions with climate policies. Demands for input to the UNFCCC process and the lobbying of policymakers compelled unions to formulate positions that could legitimately be put forward at the COP meetings. This led unions to expand the range of concerns taken into consideration in their climate policies, in a process of frame extension (Snow et al. 1986, Snow et al. 2014). In this section, we discuss international unions’ participation in the COP meetings and the gradual reframing of the just transition discourse.

4.1. The role of the COP meetings in giving structure to unions’ engagement with climate policies

Trade union participation in the COP meetings has affected their engagement with climate policies. The rising global importance of climate politics and the objective of being recognized as an official constituency led unions to increase their presence at the COP meetings and to strengthen their lobbying endeavors with a view to exerting tangible influence on the texts being negotiated at the UNFCCC.

Union presence at the COP meetings has increased numerically over time and broadened geographically to include more unions from developing countries. In 2000, the union delegation at the COP in The Hague, Netherlands, numbered 15 members, all from developed countries (the USA, Spain, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands) (ICFTU 2000b), reflecting the marginalization of developing countries in early climate negotiations (Najam et al. 2003). The number of participants gradually increased as of the 2007 COP meeting in Bali, Indonesia, where the union delegation numbered 91 members. At the 2009 COP in Copenhagen, the union delegation jumped to 290 registered participants, while 173 participated in the 2010 COP held in Cancun, Mexico (ITUC 2009e). For financial reasons, most of the delegates to the COP

meetings initially came from developed countries, with regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia-Pacific under-represented. This changed when the ITUC, in conjunction with affiliates from developed countries, mobilized funding to pay the travel costs of delegates from developing countries, as witnessed by the 2009 Copenhagen COP where several ITUC affiliates, including the British TUC and the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions LO, financially supported the participation of unions from developing countries.

Parallel to this increase in numbers, the union delegations to the COP meetings became more organized. Starting in 2006, daily trade union meetings were held during the climate conferences to plan activities and coordinate lobbying. Trade unions initially just had “observer” status at the UNFCCC meetings, while companies and environmental NGOs were recognized early on as official constituencies (Kuyper and Bäckstrand 2016). To better influence the UNFCCC process, the ITUC sought to obtain a formal constituency status for unions. This was granted in 2008, with the ITUC acting as a focal point of the constituency and as an intermediary with the UNFCCC secretariat. The constituency status brings with it the right to take the floor during plenary sessions and to receive technical information, while at the same time facilitating access to the premises of the COP meetings, even though non-state actors are excluded from many decision-making meetings due to the intergovernmental nature of negotiations (Nasiritousi and Linnér 2016). Before granting this constituency status, the UNFCCC spelled out its expectations, mentioning, among others, the provision of consolidated and coordinated inputs by unions, and the regular participation of member organizations in sessions (UNFCCC letter 2007).

The constraints of participating in the COP meetings led the ITUC to strengthen the organization of its delegations. In 2008, an ITUC report suggested that trade union delegations to the COP meetings should be organized to “somewhat mirror the political structure of the UNFCCC conferences themselves, e.g., to be headed by the trade union leadership of the host country, along with the leadership of the [ITUC’s] Task Force” (ITUC 2008b). In the COP meetings, the ITUC and its affiliates addressed the formal UNFCCC plenary sessions, participated in committee meetings, held bilateral meetings with government delegations and organized side events such as conferences and panels.

Participation in the UNFCCC also prompted the ITUC to develop more focused policy positions. In 2005, the union delegates to the COP meeting decided to focus more on following the work of the UNFCCC technical bodies. An ITUC report commented on this decision in retrospect: “This marked a shift from previous trade union practice at UNFCCC meetings where, largely because of limited resources, our efforts consisted primarily of position-taking, information and dissemination, or attempts to establish a presence” (ITUC 2006). The ITUC delegations to the COP meetings thus started taking detailed positions on paragraphs and text variants of the planned agreement that they considered worthwhile supporting. To facilitate its affiliates’ lobbying, the ITUC produced, for instance, several internal documents highlighting the paragraphs and wordings that unions wanted to see introduced or maintained in the negotiation texts (ITUC 2009c). In the run-up to the Copenhagen conference, the ITUC focused its lobbying activities on getting the just transition notion included in the negotiation text as a “key step in our strategy for incorporating major labour priorities in the next UNFCCC agreement” (ITUC 2009b). In the process, the international union movement reframed its just transition notion, in particular with regard to the balance between employment and environmental objectives.

4.2. Framing the transition: shifting priorities and government support

Trade union lobbying of national governments and the UNFCCC secretariat increasingly focused on incorporating the just transition notion into international climate policies. The notion has since been taken up by national governments in line with their interests and priorities. Uptake has been facilitated by the adaptability of the just

transition notion, reflecting unions' shifting priority-setting between employment and environmental objectives and confirming that frames are not static but evolving and malleable (Snow et al. 2014).

The "just transition" concept goes back to debates within Northern American unions in the 1970s which attempted to address the potentially adverse impact of environmental policies on workers in hazardous industries (Labor Network for Sustainability 2016, Morean et al. 2019, Stevis and Felli 2020). The term was taken up in the late 1990s and early 2000s by the ICFTU in the context of the climate discussion to highlight the need to address employment issues (Hampton 2015). For instance, the ICFTU organized a workshop at the 2000 COP in The Hague during which it advocated a "social and employment transition" to avoid "jobs-vs-environment" conflicts" (ICFTU 2000a). In the eyes of the ICFTU, this transition entailed "retraining, re-employment, compensation, or otherwise continued livelihood" (ICFTU 2001). Due to deadlocked internal policy discussions, these early references to a just transition did not include calls for binding emission reductions. Counterposing environmental against employment concerns, the ICFTU explicitly signaled that it was not willing to support climate mitigation policies until the adverse effects of these policies on employment were addressed. During a union event at the 2000 COP meeting, the ICFTU vice-president declared that "full worker and trade union support of measures to address climate change would not materialize unless programs were put in place to predict employment impacts" (ICFTU, TUAC, ETUC 2000).

In the second half of the 2000s, against a background of growing union involvement in the UNFCCC and internal realignments following the founding of the ITUC discussed earlier in the article, the international union movement gradually reframed the just transition notion as entailing proactive support for the ecological transition. On the occasion of the 2007 COP meeting held in Bali and in contrast to earlier union declarations, the ITUC adopted a statement explicitly calling for the adoption of emission reduction targets based on the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Parallel to stressing the need for a "just transition process", the document also emphasized the need for ambitious climate action: "The essential challenge for COP13 is to establish an ambitious mandate for engaging all countries into a stronger commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions" and urged governments to "follow the IPCC scenario for keeping the global temperature increase to within 2°C and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 85 % by 2050" (ITUC 2007). A key member of the ITUC working group on climate change considered that the just transition concept made it possible to bridge the gap between the positions of the various affiliates:

"Getting the statement agreed that the ITUC presented to the Bali COP was really difficult and took a lot of work on the wording [...] We were in behind two degrees, and we were looking for just transition and decent work. But just transition was the kind of overall demand that emerged as a bit of language at that time, and it was the Americans that were bringing in the idea of a just transition of the workforce and the idea of decent work, which is the ILO concept. By the time we got to Bali we had pulled together a strong delegation though we had some unresolved issues at the heart of it, and these issues remained tense all the way through to the Copenhagen COP. The big thing was to have got the Americans in the room, that was definitively the big achievement of that period." (Interview, ITUC official)

Among the "unresolved tensions" mentioned by this ITUC official was the fact that the AFL-CIO was not fully committed to the emission reduction targets put forward by the IPCC which it did not consider achievable (AFL-CIO 2008). This time however, the US union confederation refrained from taking obstructionist positions, unlike its stance on the Kyoto Protocol. On the topic of relations with the ITUC over climate policies, a report to the AFL-CIO council noted: "There was an open discussion [on emission targets] and an agreement to disagree"

(AFL-CIO, c. 2008).

In the run-up to the 2009 Copenhagen COP, the ITUC further defined what was to be understood under just transition. The five pillars of the just transition to a decarbonized economy were (and still are): public support for workers negatively affected by decarbonization, planning of the transition process, social dialogue, training and retraining for workers, and social protection schemes (ITUC 2009d). The just transition concept as shaped by the international union movement appears to mostly fit developed countries with social protection schemes and established social dialogue institutions in which public authorities recognize unions as legitimate interlocutors. According to an ITUC official in charge of climate policies, a number of affiliates from the Global South, for instance unions from Brazil, have pointed out that the just transition framework based on collaborative industrial relations does not reflect national realities characterized by contentious labor relations and political violence (Interview, ITUC official). International unions have been criticized as being Eurocentric, with union representatives from developing countries less involved in decision-making (Collombat 2009). A former representative of the ICFTU acknowledges that the union committees and working groups in charge of formulating climate policies were "heavily biased towards industrialized countries representatives. [...] The participation of developing countries was limited and weak, even if you had physical bodies on the chairs" (Interview, ICFTU official).

The just transition notion was first included in the UNFCCC process in 2009 when the official negotiating text tabled in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit mentioned the need for a "just transition of the workforce" and for a "gradual and just transition in the most impacted economic sectors", that is, those likely to be negatively affected by emission reduction policies. The government of Argentina, a country generally unfavorable to stringent mitigation commitments, played a noticeable role in supporting the call for a just transition, including it in a submission to the UNFCCC prior to the Copenhagen conference (ITUC 2009a). Further support for keeping the reference to a just transition in the negotiation text came in particular from the Norwegian government delegation, while Spain and Belgium, as incoming presidencies of the European Union (EU), were important in obtaining the EU's support, according to the ITUC's analysis (ITUC 2009f). One experienced member of the AFL-CIO delegations to the COP meetings considered that the main strength of unions was their ability to reach out to both developing and developed countries:

"In the global climate talks, the ITUC was in the absolutely unique position as an organization to have the ability to talk to the third world and the first world at the same time, on a broad scale. [...] We could have a delegation that was made up of first and third world people, and we could open doors to have conversations across the economic world, and many other institutions didn't have that reach." (Interview, AFL-CIO official)

At the 2010 COP meeting in Cancun, a reference to the need to ensure "a just transition of the workforce that creates decent work and quality jobs" was included in the "shared vision" for a future global climate agreement (UNFCCC 2010). In 2015, the non-binding preamble to the Paris agreement mentioned the need to take "into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs" (UNFCCC 2015). An expert delegate from an EU member state involved in the drafting of the preamble of the Paris agreement stressed that support for the inclusion of the just transition concept came from various stakeholders and parties to the negotiations, including developing countries which considered it to be a way of gaining time:

"The term 'just transition' was pushed from different directions. Naturally, there were the trade unions that wanted to make sure [...] that workers who lost their jobs received support. On the other hand, many developing countries supported the term in a different context,

arguing that they still needed to develop more and therefore needed more time. Just transition was thus not just considered as a worker issue, but was also pushed by countries that needed more time. But I would say that the strongest push came from trade unions, and many NGOs also supported it.” (Interview, expert delegate at Paris COP)

According to a former ITUC official, Saudi Arabia was a “driver” behind developing countries’ support for the just transition, as the notion resonated with Saudi Arabia’s concern for the so-called adverse impacts of response measures to climate change (Interview, ITUC official). The ITUC considered the inclusion of the just transition in the preamble of the Paris agreement a major success for its lobbying endeavors, although it would have preferred to have seen an explicit commitment in the main body of the agreement (ITUC 2015).

The success of the just transition concept in climate politics is not only due to the fact that it allowed the different approaches within the international union movement to be bridged, but also to the fact that it resonated with the priorities and interests of numerous national governments.

5. Conclusion

The engagement of international trade unions with climate change has been shaped at the nexus of unions’ internal politics, coalition strategies and the institutional environment of the UNFCCC process. The influence of these three components was stronger or weaker at different points in time. During the initial phase of unions’ engagement with climate change mitigation in the 1990s, internal politics and opposition to decarbonization from unions representing carbon-intensive industries played a key role. Coalitions with external allies, be they employers or multilateral organizations, also influenced initial union approaches to climate policies. These coalitions were a way of borrowing resources and strengthening unions’ capacity to engage with the technical dimensions of climate negotiations and build up policy positions (Rose 2000, Zartman and Rubin 2000). The institutional constraints of the UNFCCC, and the need to formulate policy positions that could be put forward in the UNFCCC process and taken up by government delegations came to play a prevalent role during the discussions over a follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol.

Tensions between different interests and approaches were present throughout the successive phases of international unions’ engagement with climate change. Divides emerged between unions advocating more stringent mitigation commitments and unions opposing them. These were also reflected in different coalition strategies, with some national affiliates aligning with employers and the international leadership seeking support from multilateral organizations. Internal tensions also dominated the elaboration of the just transition framework, an inherently ambiguous concept characterized by priorities shifting between economic security and environmental protection (Stevis and Felli 2020). In practice, the just transition concept allows the simultaneous pursuit of contradictory policies, accommodating both the most climate-ambitious and the more reticent unions. Similarly, the just transition concept has been taken up both by national governments supporting more stringent mitigation commitments and by governments opposing such commitments and intent on gaining time. A key factor in the success of the just transition concept has been its capacity to bridge and temporarily conceal disagreements over the adequate framing of climate policies, making it possible for a broad range of policymakers to endorse it (Contamin 2020).

Now that the just transition concept has become an established part of the international climate discourse (Morena et al. 2019), the question is how the concept will be implemented at national and industry level. In many countries, national union movements are asking to be consulted on the Nationally Determined Contributions that outline countries’ planned actions to achieve the objectives of the Paris agreement (Jenkins et al. 2020). At national level, other factors can be expected to shape

union positions than those discussed at international level. As trade unions are membership organizations that have to defend their members’ interests, the national make-up of union movements and the sectoral distribution of their members in the broader national economies can be expected to play a key role. Unions also have to weigh up the interests of their members in carbon-intensive industries and of those working in low-carbon activities (Mildenberger 2020). The scope of national unemployment insurance schemes and labor market policies supporting job transitions can furthermore be expected to influence union responses to decarbonization policies (Hyde and Vachon 2019).

The international trade union movements’ emphasis on a collaborative approach to the just transition raises the question of how unions in countries devoid of institutional social dialogue mechanisms can engage with decarbonization policies. In addition, from a North-South perspective, issues of economic nationalism risk moving more strongly into the foreground as discussions over possible carbon border taxes gain traction with the European Commission’s proposal for a carbon border adjustment mechanism. International trade policies have indeed been a divisive issue for trade unions in the Global North and South. Southern unions have, for instance, considered the demands by unions from developed countries for the inclusion of labor standards in international trade agreements as a form of economic protectionism (Bieler 2012, Park 2014). In the domain of climate policies, such differences in national outlooks risk reopening dissensions within the international union movement, bringing to the fore some of the disagreements previously hidden by the joint advocacy for the just transition concept.

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