

## Contesting a 'just transition to a low carbon economy'

by Jacklyn Cock

### Introduction

Recently, the South African labour federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), has expressed its commitment to a 'just transition to a low carbon economy.' However, at this moment the content of that commitment is unclear. Members of Cosatu affiliates could have very different understandings of the scale and nature of the changes involved. A 'just transition' could involve demands for shallow change focused on protecting vulnerable workers, or it could involve deep change rooted in a vision of dramatically different forms of production and consumption. In this sense, the ecological crisis represents an opportunity to not only address the unemployment crisis in our society, but to demand the redistribution of power and resources, to challenge the conventional understanding of economic growth and to mobilise for an alternative development path.

It could also generate a new kind of transnational solidarity, larger, deeper and more powerful than anything we have yet seen. Moving beyond solidarities based on interests or identities, Hyman emphasises that 'the challenge is to reconceptualise solidarity in ways which encompass the local, the national, the European and the global. For unions to survive and thrive, the principle of solidarity must not only be redefined and reinvented: workers on the ground must be active participants in this redefinition and reinvention' (Hyman, 2011). Most clearly in its warnings of the threat to human survival, the discourse of climate change could be contributing to such a process.

Obviously, the transition to a low carbon or green economy has massive implications for labour. Historically, the labour movement in South Africa has neglected environmental issues. This is largely because of a widespread understanding that environmental protection threatened jobs (Cock, 2007). For example, while the contamination of the local air and groundwater by the steel corporation Arcelor Mittal was known, workers' participation in the struggle for environmental justice was blunted by the fear of job losses. Ironically, what is now driving trade unions into a concern with climate change is the indirect threat posed to existing energy intensive jobs and the possibility of new 'green' jobs. However, the labour movement still has to resolve a key question: 'are green jobs one component of a new green capitalism, which is turning the climate crisis into an opportunity for accumulation? Or, are green jobs part of a 'green economy' which - "based on rights, sustainability principles and decent work" - can meet the challenge of a just transition?' (Sustainlabour, 2011). To complicate the question, while reference to the

green economy appears in many official policy documents, it is often either undefined, or defined in a very narrow, technician sense of being viewed as something separate, as an 'add on' to the 'real economy'. This last approach is evident in the National Climate Response White Paper issued by the South African government.

### The International Trade Union Response

Trade unions have participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since its inception, under the umbrella of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which represents 170 million workers through its affiliated organisations in 157 countries. The ITUC report (2009) entitled *Equity, Justice and solidarity in the fight against climate change* stresses the need "to create green and decent jobs, transform and improve traditional ones, and include democracy and social justice in environmental decision-making processes". A Just Transition is described as "a tool the trade union movement shares with the international community, aimed at smoothing the shift towards a more sustainable society and providing hope for the capacity of a 'green economy' to sustain decent jobs and livelihoods for all". (ITUC, 2009)

### The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) response

In recent years, Cosatu, a trade union federation with 2 million members and 20 affiliate unions, has started to recognise climate change as a developmental and social issue. In September 2011, the central executive committee endorsed a policy framework on climate change, based on fifteen principles including the following: Capital accumulation has been the underlying cause of excessive greenhouse gas emissions and therefore global warming and climate change. As such, a new low carbon development path is needed which addresses the need for decent jobs and the elimination of unemployment. The issue of food security must be urgently addressed and all South Africans should have the right to clean, safe and affordable energy. Cosatu rejects market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions and contends that developed countries must pay their climate debt and the Green Climate fund must be accountable. Finally, a 'just transition' towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient society is required.

## Different understandings of a 'just transition to a low carbon economy: 'paradigm shift' or 'regime change'?

While capital's discourse of a low carbon economy emphasises growth, competitiveness and efficiency, the labour movement agrees on this notion of a 'just transition'. However, a point of contention among unionists involves the *substantive content* in the notion of a 'just transition'. Whereas the ITUC speaks of a 'paradigm shift', some activists from the Cosatu affiliate the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) speak of 'regime change'. While a 'paradigm shift' simply involves a change in ways of thinking about the issue, which could be 'thin' or minimalist, a 'regime change' implies a fundamental transformation in the way power and resources are distributed, and economic activities are regulated and controlled.

Two broad approaches to this notion of a 'just transition' may be identified:

- i) The minimalist position emphasises shallow, reformist change with green jobs, social protection, retraining and consultation. The emphasis is defensive and shows a preoccupation with protecting the interest of vulnerable workers.
- ii) An alternative notion of a just transition involves transformative change; an alternative growth path and new ways of producing and consuming.

The difference is clear in comparing two statements: first, let us observe the position of the 'Cancun agreements', formulated at the Conference of Parties (COP 16 in 2010), which states that a just transition means ensuring "...the importance of avoiding or minimising negative impacts of response measures on social and economic sectors, promoting a just transition of the workforce, creating decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities and strategies and contributing to building new capacity for both production and service related jobs in all sectors, promoting economic growth and sustainable development."

In contrast, the Cosatu affiliate Samwu's language differs quite dramatically, as seen in its response to the South African government's National Climate Change Response Green Paper, drafted in February 2011, which states that "tackling greenhouse gas emissions is not just a technical or technological problem. It requires a fundamental economic and social transformation to substantially change current patterns of production and consumption."

In the Cosatu policy framework, the explanation of a just transition reads, "The evidence suggests that the transition to a low carbon economy will potentially create more jobs than it will lose. But we have to campaign for protection and support for workers whose jobs or livelihoods might be threatened by the transition. If we do not do that, then these workers will resist the transition. We also have to ensure that the development of new, green industries does not become an excuse for lowering wages and social benefits. New environmentally-friendly jobs provide an opportunity to

redress many of the gender imbalances in employment and skills. The combination of these interventions is what we mean by a just transition."

The Policy Framework goes on to say, "The Just Transition is a concept that COSATU has supported in the global engagements on climate change that have been led by the ITUC. The basic demands of a Just Transition are:

- Investment in environmentally friendly activities that create decent jobs that are paid at living wages, that meet standards of health and safety, that promote gender equity and that are secure
- The putting in place of comprehensive social protections (pensions, unemployment insurance etc.) in order to protect the most vulnerable
- The conducting of research into the impacts of climate change on employment and livelihoods in order to better inform social policies
- Skills development and retraining of workers to ensure that they can be part of the new low-carbon development model.

The question is: are these necessary but sufficient conditions for a just transition? COSATU affiliates are going to interpret the concept very differently with perhaps the National Union of Mineworkers feeling the most threatened by the changes implied.

## Conclusion

No serious observer now denies the severity of the environmental crisis, 'but it is still not widely recognised as a capitalist crisis, that is, a crisis arising from and perpetuated by the rule of capital, and hence incapable of resolution within the capitalist framework' (Wallis, 2010). In this sense the climate crisis represents an opportunity for labour to promote a transformative understanding of a 'just transition to a low carbon economy' and to mobilise for an alternative development path.

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