

## Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Just Transitions - a Global Exploration: The Trades Union Congress on climate change and workers' voices

Speakers: Jo Cutter and Sam Perry

[00:00:00] **Jo:** Hi everyone and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. My name is Jo Cutter. I'm a lecturer in work and employment relations here at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:15] **Sam:** Hi, I'm Sam Perry. I'm the Green Bargaining Officer for Yorkshire and Humber TUC. Thank you very much for having me.

[00:00:23] **Jo:** You're very welcome. I'm looking forward to our discussion. But just to introduce this episode of the "Just Transition - Global Exploration", we're looking at some of the Just Transition work that's been happening in the UK. And we're going to home in on the Yorkshire and Humber region and the work of the TUC and Sam's work.

Some of you may, or some of you may not know that Yorkshire and Humber is an industrial region in the north of the UK and the regional TUC has been doing some interesting work over the last few years to think about the role of unions and workers in the green transition and we'll talk more about this in this episode.

If you've not heard about the wider project and the work that we're doing on Just Transition across 12 countries across the globe, it'd be useful to have a listen to episode one in this series, and also on the podcast page, and there'll be links in the show notes, information about some of the other episodes that we've recently launched - one on Poland, there's one on South Africa - and keep checking back for future editions.

But coming back to the work of the TUC in the Yorkshire and Humber region - Sam, before we leap into the detail of your work in this area, can you just talk a little bit about what you understand by the term "Just Transition"?

[00:01:38] **Sam:** So I think for us, for the TUC, Just Transition is about making sure that the social and economic changes that are happening because of climate change, and to mitigate or avert climate change, are essentially positive, not negative - that this transition is to something [00:02:00] better than what was happening before.

I mean, it's not, it's not unique to the UK or to Britain, but we've got huge inequalities of wealth and opportunity and health and housing and all sorts of things here. And a lot of the reasons for these problems share a common cause with the reasons for climate change. They're part of the same set of issues and power relationships. And I think there are lots of ways that society could mitigate or avert the negative effects of climate change, but our focus at the TUC and in the labour movement generally, maybe, is on insisting that we employ the right approaches here.

That politicians and businesses go down the routes that actually improve the lives of workers and the health of communities and empower people, I suppose - not down the paths that just perpetuate what we've been doing so far. So this needs to be a Just Transition. The transition needs to be about workers; it needs to be led by workers and something that works for workers.

[00:03:08] **Jo:** That's great. Thanks Sam . It's such a difficult question because the notion of just transition incorporates so many... a variety of concepts around change, the transition to something better, but also ensuring that those who are potentially vulnerable from those changes and not forgotten and left behind.

So thanks so much for getting us started with thinking about how specifically the TUC talks about that. It's really interesting to hear that you talk about it in terms of positive change, because sometimes just transition is portrayed much more in terms of the kind of the negative impacts on work. So that's a really, really interesting standpoint.

Okay, so moving on from that, if you like, broad conceptual discussion, perhaps you could just take us into explaining a bit about how the TUC in this region has been [00:04:00] approaching these questions of transition.

[00:04:02] **Sam:** Yeah, sure. So, I guess maybe context is important first. So, TUC represents workers across the country. And we've got links with sister organisations around the world as well. So, in a way, that means we can't help but be aware of the need for this just transition.

We have to put it front and centre for everything we do. But in Yorkshire and Humber, we're also operating in a particular local context. So, the history is that much of our region underwent a forced economic transition in the past, de-industrialization, which started in the 1980s. And many communities here still haven't really recovered from that. While at the same time, the industry that remained, which is largely on the Humber estuary, still employs vast numbers of people, still sustains towns, which if these industries were to disappear or collapse, or be taken out of existence, would have a pretty hard time of it.

And actually, this industrial cluster is the second largest source of carbon emissions in Europe. So, you know, we've got kind of this, this industrial position on both sides. If we're to help make the world of work better for workers in Yorkshire and Humber, which is our purpose at the TUC, we need to find both opportunities in the transition to get the majority into sustainable and better secure employment while finding ways to transition fossil fuel workers into alternative work. And so that's what we've been doing for a number of years now in Yorkshire and Humber TUC.

It's embedded, or we're working on embedding it and everything we do, but we've also got these sort of specific forums to make sure that this is forefronted for us.

So, I guess a really key one is the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission. This was established a few years ago [00:06:00] by the Yorkshire and Humber Leaders Board, but the TUC has been a key part of that, alongside other local anchor institutions in the region, including the University of Leeds, where Jo's from, which I think has been largely funding this so far.

But the idea there is that it's an independent body that brings together public and private and third sector regional actors to support and guide and I guess track the delivery of climate actions across the region. And it's great that we've obviously been able to play such a big part in this because it's a genuinely significant thing, which is bringing together ideas and developing regional policy in a way that we've not really seen before and not really seen anywhere else.

It's allowed space, I think, for pretty open debate and mostly constructive criticism of different positions in the region. So we've got big business and big polluters there. We've also got the TUC and we've got universities and trade bodies, loads of loads of actors in that same room.

So we can all kind of provide a counterweight to each other. And from our perspective, we like to bring the workers voice and that kind of real lived experience of our members to the broader awareness of those other groups.

[00:07:20] **Jo:** Yeah, it's a really, a really interesting innovation, if you like, in terms of bringing that variety of stakeholders together. I mean, the Climate Commission also includes those who were, would see themselves as green groups or climate activists. So I think that's pretty rare, as you say, to have that really quite open and challenging conversations some time to have those different stakeholders on board.

[00:07:43] **Sam:** That's true. Yeah. I mean, we're very rarely all in the same room. You know, I do a lot of talking about green stuff and I'm normally faced by a sea of people who agree with me. So, to be in these, these spaces where you do have genuinely conflicting views, but you're also all [00:08:00] motivated to find a common solution or at least discuss it openly, is really quite refreshing.

[00:08:06] **Jo:** Yeah. And what for you would you see, I mean, I know you're involved specifically in some aspects of the work of the Commission, and how do you see that as an instrument, as a tool for advancing the interests of workers in this broader debate about the climate transition?

[00:08:23] **Sam:** I think it's really helpful - I mean the TUC has led the future economies panel which is a subsection of that, and we've been very active on the Net Zero panel - again another subsection - which has given us an elevated voice. I mean, we obviously represent hundreds of thousands of workers in the region, but we don't necessarily get to shout about their voices that often. And so those kind of panels have given us that platform to be able to talk about it.

And we were very key in setting up the climate action pledge, which came out of the commission. The idea there is that it's something that organisations of any size can sign up to say that they're taking the climate crisis seriously, and taking actual actions to reduce their carbon emissions, and crucially to work with their employees to get there.

And I think that's been really, that's been really key. I think it does need a bit of reforming. We're actually at the end of one of the funding cycles for the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission, which is giving us a bit of an opportunity to reflect on what's worked and what hasn't worked over the last period.

And we, as critical friends of the businesses in the region, in the TUC, have taken that opportunity quite keenly. So, we're very keen to get Just Transition and worker voice more on the agenda than it has been. It's been a kind of general theme so far and we've played our part in doing what we can, but I think it could be forefronted even [00:10:00] more and we're finding ways to do that with the Secretariat at the moment.

[00:10:03] **Jo:** Right. What would you - I mean it might be too early to say, if you're still having those conversation about the next iteration of that work - but just coming, for example, to the pledge and

thinking about the question of the voice of workers as being, you know, highlighting that this is an important part of those pledges. Does that lead to, I don't know, a specific conversation about workplace bargaining and negotiation, you know, is there something more specific that you're looking to embed or what direction do you think that the Commission could take, both in the work of the pledge and other aspects of its work, to really, as you say, really embed this way of thinking about the voice and the interests of workers in this broader transition?

[00:10:50] **Sam:** Worker voice is always a slightly difficult thing to pin down because obviously we're all workers - the vast majority of people - so to be able to reduce that to something that we can pass on, or "this is what the workers think", is kind of a nonsense in many ways, but is also something that we exist to do. And so, it's a difficult thing.

What we're trying to argue for and advocate for in the next iteration, is to get actual workers in the room more often to hear people's stories more directly and to kind of seize upon and realize in a, in a very real way that we are not only talking to people who realize that climate change is a problem. We're talking about everyone and we're talking to people who, for whom precarity at work is a problem. They don't see that that's a climate change issue, but it is. And we are talking about people who see sexism at work, and they don't necessarily think that that's a climate change issue, but it is.

And so I think it's kind of broadening that out and getting more [00:12:00] perspectives on what the effects of Climate Change and the economic systems behind that actually are on workers. And so that's what we want to put in.

From a TUC point of view, we've got a broader campaign to argue for climate and jobs action plans in workplaces. And so, what these look like are worker-led plans, alternative plans, essentially, that they would put to their managers and say, "look - we want to keep the company doing what it's doing, but the way it's doing it at the moment is unsustainable. And so these are the changes that you need to make."

We'd love that to be in every workplace. And we'd love to empower workers to be able to do that for every employer. But putting that in a pledge that employers themselves would sign up to is probably not a very, you know, it's not going to get a lot of sign up. Right. So we need to find a way to empower workers through the pledge or through a similar mechanism to allow this kind of action to happen as a result, but not put the cart before the horse and stop all progress altogether.

[00:13:06] **Jo:** Yeah, that's really, really interesting and really excited to see what the next iteration of the plans of the Commission look like with your, you know, with your input and bringing these important points to those broader structures.

I'm also aware that you're doing specific work around the massive challenge in the UK of housing retrofit. So ensuring that housing is more sustainable and certainly we have an existing stock of housing in the UK in general and in Yorkshire and Humber in particular that is very drafty and leaky. So, I'd be really interested if you'd just tell me a bit more about what you've been doing on that front.

[00:13:39] **Sam:** Yeah, so sure. So, this is the process of retrofit – which is one of these technical terms that doesn't mean anything to most people, so also "home upgrading". We're talking about making homes a lot more energy efficient and less dependent on fossil [00:14:00] fuels, usually by adding insulation, replacing gas boilers with heat pumps or, or some other low carbon heating

system, maybe replacing windows and doors, triple or double glazing, maybe solar panels, smart ventilation systems, all this kind of stuff.

The figures are that there are 28 million homes, roughly, in the UK, which amounts for something like 15 to 20 percent of all the carbon emissions from the UK. And about 21 million of them, so maybe two thirds, of them already fall short of a kind of baseline of energy efficiency anyway, whether or not we're talking about carbon.

And so there's obviously a big housing efficiency problem generally. But climate change happening on the back of that, there's an urgency to both decarbonize our housing and also upgrade our housing to make them more comfortable and healthy for everyone.

The government have done some work on this over the last decade or so, but that work has been quite piecemeal. It's often been poor quality and it's often kind of inadequate anyway, you know, if you lag a loft, that's great but you still have the rest of the house to retrofit. You've still got the rest of the changes to make.

The Labour Party have promised some more money here 28 billion for Green New Deal and 6 billion for retrofit each year. We'll see how that plays out. We haven't got any detail there, but you know, this is a topic that's being discussed at a national level, but it's not necessarily being discussed by workers or with any reference to workers or who will do this work. And so, part of what we're doing is lobbying government and also the Labour Party, who may win government in the next general election.

We've got a position paper coming out very soon which calls for a Universal National Retrofit Strategy with funded local authority delivery. A little [00:16:00] bit of a plug there, but we'll see how that comes out. That will be available soon.

Regionally, we've had some success with politicians and leaders, especially through the Commission and with the Housing Partnerships, which are groups of social housing organisations, to increase retrofit and to do better quality work and to support training of workers in order to do this.

But this is an issue which, although is beneficial for workers, hasn't actually been led by workers so far. We're not seeing the unions taking a huge interest in advocating for better quality retrofit, better quality retrofit training or provision. And that's a pity. And so, the TUC has kind of recognized that, and so have certain other unions, and we're working together to try and rectify that problem.

We've seen some really good examples of this happening - Living Rent and a load of trade unions up in Scotland had some really good success in Edinburgh retrofitting some blocks of houses there.

It was a really good campaign. It was community-driven; the tenants recognised that their homes were cold, unhealthy, and the trade unions recognised that they wanted to do the work to retrofit them, and the local authority had some money to be able to put towards this. And so, by creating a campaign, they managed to get the local authority to actually put this retrofit work in. And we'd like to see that replicated in Yorkshire or across the rest of the country to upgrade our housing stock in a way that it's not necessarily done at the moment.

[00:17:33] **Jo:** Yeah, I think that's a really great example and a really important initiative in terms of, you know, the upgrading and the retrofit of our housing stock. It's not going to happen house by house. There needs to be a more systematic approach. And thinking about the workforce that is going to do that in a more sort of holistic way with unions is a really, really important part of the puzzle.

Given the significance of housing in the UK context in terms of the amount of emissions that comes from the wasted energy [00:18:00] and the reliance on fossil fuel to heat our homes, and I think the final dimension of what you've just highlighted is that a more systematic approach is also, hopefully, would reduce some of the inequalities that you highlighted right at the beginning.

If we just leave it to the market, it's likely that the middle classes would be able to afford to retrofit, but the people that are in bad quality homes and on low incomes are much less likely to be able to afford those kinds of those installations.

[00:18:30] **Sam:** That's exactly the issue. This is not only a climate change or an infrastructure project. This is a real opportunity that's available now as a class issue or as a kind of true levelling up issue in a very real sense, rather than how the government uses that term, because, you know, the only way to do this would be publicly-led long-term, well-skilled, socially responsible initiatives that got colleges and local authorities and industry all working together to build young people into retrofitters and to move existing construction workers or people in at risk jobs like gas boiler fitters, self-employed construction workers, industry workers, move them into this new industry.

So, you know, it could really be a multifaceted solution to a lot of our problems all at once.

[00:19:28] **Jo:** Yeah, absolutely. Sam - thank you so much for these reflections. It's been really great to hear about the work that you're doing here in the region. And also how that connects both, you know, to both being inspired by what else is happening across the UK and I'm sure informing other regions who are interested to develop similar approaches to just transition. So thank you very much. Is there anything that you want to add?

[00:19:51] **Sam:** Well, I'll just plug that we've got the Yorkshire and Humber Just Transition Network now, which is a group for climate activists and lay [00:20:00] trade union members. No experience required. It meets online. And we'll put the details in the, in the show notes as well. So, anyone who wants to join or listen in can contact me and we'll arrange that.

[00:20:14] **Jo:** That's great. Thanks, Sam.

[00:20:15] **Sam:** Thank you for having me. Thank you very much.

[00:20:18] **Jo:** So, everyone, just a reminder - there are further details about this broader study, the Hans Bockler Foundation project in the show notes. And also, we'll add contact details for Sam and myself, so if you're interested please do get in touch with Sam to hear more about the work that he's doing.

And also check back with us for future episodes that will be covering a range of topics on just transition across our 12 case study countries.